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"The Sister Was Not a Mister": Gender and Sexuality in the Writings of Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf

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**“The Sister Was Not a Mister”:
Gender and Sexuality in the Writings of
Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf**

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“The Sister Was Not a Mister”: Introduction

“We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the other. By our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment” (Irigaray, *When Our Lips*, 209-210).

Luce Irigaray was a prominent French feminist during the later twentieth-century, and became well known for her rejection of Freudian thought and prevailing academic views of women. Irigaray’s denunciation of phallocentric definitions of women remains a powerful feminist statement, one that asserts woman’s presence as legitimate and independent. While Irigaray’s assertion reacts specifically to Freudian theory during the mid twentieth-century, modernist women writers in the early twentieth-century posited many similar ideas. Irigaray’s denial of a heteronormative presentation of women challenges many commonly held beliefs in the late twentieth-century concerning gender and its connection to sexuality. Irigaray directly challenges the gender binary by rejecting the women’s definition as “not men,” rather than identifying femininity as an independent identity. Irigaray’s challenge to notions of gender also challenges assumptions of heterosexuality, and she claims that women do not seek to “consume” sexual fulfillment solely from men. Irigaray’s statement becomes monumental in its assertion of a non-heterosexual woman, leaving the possibility open for lesbian and solely female sexual desire and pleasure.

Gertrude Stein’s publication of *Tender Buttons* in 1914 heavily critiques the limitations heteronormativity places upon female desire and sexuality. Later, in 1928, Virginia Woolf’s

Orlando explores many of these same critiques by creating a character that changes gender halfway through the novel, creating an ambiguous form of sexuality. These challenges to limited gender and sexuality presentation put these works in conversation with each other and allow Woolf's work to build on Stein's initial critiques. These critiques connect two otherwise seemingly disparate works, especially considering the literary style each writer works within. Even today, Stein's work remains highly experimental and opaque. The constant word repetition, sentence fragmentation, and seemingly nonsensical phrases deny the reader not only the gaze, but the ability to ascertain a coherent meaning as well. Stein's *Tender Buttons* consists of three sections: "Objects," "Food," and "Rooms." As she progresses into each section, her poetry's content becomes increasingly intimate, resulting in "Rooms" as a single, twelve page poem. Her poetic form also differs from expectations because she chooses to write in paragraph form rather than stanzas. Her incorporation of a prose style of organization furthers the experimental nature of her work. In contrast, Woolf's novel follows a more standard narrative structure. The novel begins in the Elizabethan era with Orlando as a man and follows his interaction with Queen Elizabeth. After a love affair with a Russian princess goes awry, he eventually leaves for Constantinople where he awakens one morning to find he has changed sexes and is now a woman. As Orlando returns to England, Woolf depicts Orlando's life as a woman, which spans into the twentieth-century and later. Although Woolf defines *Orlando* as a biography, Orlando is a fictional character. Woolf transgresses the reader's expectations by intentionally confusing the reader's ideas of fiction versus nonfiction. Woolf, like Stein, also denies the reader's expectations of the work's form. Although Woolf follows a chronological trajectory throughout the novel, the narrative spans nearly three centuries in time without

Orlando appearing to age. Noticeably, not every character possesses Orlando's apparent immortality, emphasizing the absurdity of the time span. Although Stein's nonsensical wording makes *Tender Buttons* the more experimental and abstract of these two works, the deviations from traditional forms allow both authors more freedom to insert critical commentary.

This project will examine these two writers' critiques of gender and how they respond and react to contemporary sexologists' theories. I will ask how Stein and Woolf incorporate and portray aspects of the sexology theories in addition to established norms of heteronormativity. I will also ask how Stein and Woolf present gendered dynamics as part of their criticism. How do Stein and Woolf present these dynamics, and what problematic aspects do they seek to show the reader? Using early twentieth-century sexology theories and late twentieth-century gender theory, I will also consider how Stein and Woolf use established notions of gender to critique heteronormativity more broadly. Stein focuses predominantly on an examination of heterosexuality and the gendered power dynamics that inevitably shape the function of heterosexual relationships. In addition to Stein's criticisms of heteronormativity throughout *Tender Buttons*, Stein also begins to offer an alternative to heteronormative desire by celebrating consumerist and eventually lesbian desire. Woolf's *Orlando* also critiques gendered power dynamics within heterosexual relationships; yet she focuses more on heteronormative gender roles than Stein does. Through Orlando's eventual transformation from man to woman, he/she explicitly shows the reader that gender comes from learning social expectations, rather than an essential gendered core. In exposing the socially constructed elements of gender, Woolf dismantles many of the "natural" characteristics women were assumed to have. In their commentary on normative sexual desire, both Stein and Woolf draw heavily on Freudian

theories concerning sexual desire, sexual objects, and the topic of inversion. As important as recognizing Stein's and Woolf's criticisms are to understanding both texts, this project will also ask what alternatives Stein and Woolf propose to strict heterosexuality. How do sexuality and physicality function in their alternatives? While both deviate from heteronormative expectations, how are the alternatives they propose different from one another? And, what do these differences reveal about the authors' views on the connection between gender and sexuality? Finally, as Woolf's work appears chronologically later than Stein's, I will ask how Stein's work may be seen as a foundational work for Woolf's later assertions about gender and sexuality.

Before beginning the analysis of Stein's and Woolf's texts, this introduction will offer an overview of the gender theory this thesis will draw on in reading these works. Sigmund Freud's theories on sexuality gained prominence in the early twentieth-century, but they were also subjected to challenges and criticism. Stein and Woolf both critique the heteronormative and gender normative aspects within Freud's theories. Freud's ideas of non-heterosexual desire, or "inversion," define multiple forms of inversion. Within his essay "The Sexual Aberrations," Freud's categories include the "absolute invert," those whose sexual objects are always of the same sex; "amphigenic inverts," who lack a consistently gendered sexual object; and the "contingent inverts," whose sexual object may become the same sex under certain conditions (136-137). Freud asserts that inversion stems from an experience in childhood or from a traumatic event. Using the examples of the latter two cases of inversion, Freud argues against homosexuality as an "innate characteristic," and claims that even absolute inverts have experienced a "sexual impression [that] occurred which left a permanent after-effect in the

shape of a tendency to homosexuality (140). Freud's analyses of same-sex desire act more as a pathology than a legitimizing claim about homosexuality. Stein, whose lesbian desire is well documented within *Tender Buttons*, reacts against these claims by infusing her poetry with anecdotes about her own legitimate pleasure from same-sex desire. Woolf's characterization of Orlando's sudden sex shift also questions Freud's ideas of essential gender characteristics.

Freud's theories concerning homosexuality eventually lead him to the conclusion that inversion stems from some form of bisexuality. Unlike the current understanding of bisexuality as being sexually attracted to both men and women, Freud uses the phrase to denote the varying degrees of hermaphroditic qualities. Although he recognizes instances of anatomical hermaphroditism, even claiming that everyone has some trace of the opposite sex's anatomy, he also asserts the existence of "psychical hermaphrodites" (141-142). Freud asserts that the psychical hermaphrodite displays mental or personality characteristics of the opposite sex, but "it is only in inverted women that character-inversion of this kind can be looked for with any regularity" while "in men the most complete mental masculinity can be combined with inversion" (142). The concept of the "invert" as simply an oppositely gendered mental state relies on the connection between gender and sexuality, but both Stein and Woolf refute this seemingly inherent connection. Stein emphasizes feminine aspects within her poetry, focusing on the domestic sphere and infusing into her writings notions of feminine consumerist desire as well. In *Orlando*, Orlando's shift in sex and gender creates a more ambiguous sexual identity, as Woolf portrays Orlando's attraction to both men and women. Yet, because of Orlando's shift into a female body, her sexuality cannot be defined in terms of gender. This ambiguity challenges Freud's theories and expands the limitations they place on desire.

While continuing to reject heterosexuality, Stein specifically begins to play with consumerist desire, using advertising language and word play to portray a feminine form of desire. Stein also offers lesbian desire as an alternative to heterosexuality. Woolf's play with the gender binary in both Orlando and Shel's characters creates an extremely ambiguous form of desire, in which Orlando's desire cannot be read as either explicitly hetero- or homosexual. The concept of the inversion became a prominent subject for early twentieth-century sexologists, who tried to characterize and define the inverted person. Although in contemporary culture, many theorists differentiate between gender presentation and sexual orientation, many early sexologists viewed sexual orientation as a by-product of an essential gender. As Esther Newton argues in "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," lesbianism was often seen as a result of female masculine expression. Newton notes that "because sexual desire was not considered inherent in women, the lesbian was endowed with a trapped male soul that phallicized her" (95). Newton credits both Richard Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis for these conceptions of lesbian sexuality, and the prominence of their research led to these conclusions shaping popular belief. Jay Prosser's article, "Some Primitive Thing" also notes that "homosexuality was on the contrary one symptom of transgender" (133). These theories remain linked to Freudian thought in their connection between gender and sexuality. Yet, Stein and Woolf make the gender/sexuality connection more ambiguous by mixing masculine and feminine characteristics and blurring gender boundaries. Stein depicts fairly explicit scenes of sexuality and sexual desire – which was often considered masculine – while focusing on the feminine body and pleasure. Similarly, Orlando becomes the

embodiment of both genders and sexes while deemphasizing gender's importance in her relationships with other people.

Although their foundational theories focus on this basic principal, some sexologists, such as Krafft-Ebing, note different levels of gender non-normativity and its subsequent expression of same-sex desire. The first division of lesbian desire did not necessarily show many outward signs of masculinity, but consisted of women who found themselves attracted to other women with masculine traits. By the fourth division, Krafft-Ebing claims that the woman would almost appear as a man in both appearance and behavior, including such characteristics as a "deep voice, manly gait . . . small breasts" and short hair (Newton, 96). Although Krafft-Ebing's theories allow for differing degrees of masculine portrayals, the idea that masculinity must be present in either the subject or the subject's desire continues to solidify the connection between sexual orientation and gender. Havelock Ellis also contributed to several sexology theories, and many of his points coincide with Krafft-Ebing's assertions. Ellis also believed in the idea of varying degrees of inversion, but determines these degrees through the lens of their relationships. For example, Newton describes Ellis's first degree of inversion as a "passionate friendship" which may not actually involve sexual contact and the highest degree of inversion as a "sexual enthusiast" (96). Although Ellis recognizes these degrees, he also claims the first degree manifests from "sexual ignorance and repression" (96). Although Ellis and Krafft-Ebing may appear more flexible about the connection between gender and sexuality than Freud, their theories are still reluctant to legitimize same-sex desire. Through their deconstruction of gendered boundaries, Stein and Woolf not only challenge the gender/sexuality connection;

they also begin to argue for a legitimized representation of same-sex desire and an alternative to heterosexuality.

The social avoidance of the term “lesbian” in the early twentieth-century stems from the predominantly negative reaction to homosexuality. The publication of *The Well of Loneliness*, a novel depicting a masculine lesbian woman, brought significant social backlash, and the book was eventually brought up on obscenity charges. In an introduction to the novel, Havelock Ellis describes the homophobic atmosphere this novel actively challenged, writing “The relation of certain people – who, while different from their fellow human beings, are sometimes of the highest character and the finest aptitudes – to the often hostile society in which they move, presents difficult and unsolved problems” (Ellis, 35). Although the novel was eventually considered not obscene because, as Kim Emery notes, it never actually describes sexual encounters (364), its public reception and condemnation exemplify the prevailing attitudes towards lesbian desire and gender variance during Stein’s and Woolf’s careers. Their insistence on legitimizing lesbian desire – or same-sex desire more generally – can be interpreted as a reaction against not only the prevailing sexologists’ theories, but against the public’s understanding of homosexuality as deviant or obscene.

The prominence of Freudian theory throughout both Stein’s and Woolf’s works invites analysis through the lens of Jacques Lacan’s French psychoanalytic theories. Lacan’s theories build on Freudian thought, especially concerning the mirror stage in early infancy. Freud theorizes that the male infant retains a close connection to his mother after birth; however, this relationship becomes disconnected as the infant recognizes his own image in the mirror.

According to Lacan, the image of unified self contrasts with the infant's sense of internal fragmentation, and the autonomy gained through the recognition of one's individuality severs the connection to the mother. Lacan argues that this moment also coincides with the infant's introduction into the symbolic order of language (736). Once the infant enters into this order, language facilitates the subject's attempts to reconnect to an object of desire, such as the mother. However, language, created through a chain of signifier words and signified concepts, does not allow for a true (re)connection to the desired object; rather the subject uses language to pursue the ever-receding object of its desires. The mirror stage and the infant's introduction into the symbolic world then represent a moment of gain through an understanding of individual identity and loss of the desired mother object. Yet, Lacan's focus on the connection between the mother and male infant leaves room for feminist criticisms. Read through the lens of Lacan's theories, Stein's linguistic portrayal of lesbian desire and pleasure act as an opportunity to reconnect with the mother figure. Further, the reader can view Stein's excess of language to express joy and fulfillment as an example of language creating plenitude rather than loss. Woolf also depicts Orlando's relationship with the Queen as a stand-in for the mother/son relationship; however, reading this relationship through a Lacan lens, the reader can view Orlando's rejection of the Queen – a mother figure – as an assertion of forms of desire that are not founded in an Oedipal context.

While Lacan extends Freud's analysis, French feminist Luce Irigaray is one of many theorists to critique Freudian thought and its emphasis on a phallogentric world view. Irigaray specifically critiques Freudian phallogentricity for its negation of female sexuality and the feminine body. These critiques are exemplified in her essay "This sex which is not one," in

which Irigaray argues that women's lack of a penis causes them to be seen as simply negated. The internalized sexual organ represents their passivity, especially in terms of their sexuality. She describes women's constant state of "homosexuality," by which she means autoerotic pleasure. The "lack" of a phallus allows a woman's labial lips to be in constant contact with each other, producing pleasure without external stimulation. The presence of a vagina must not be considered "lacking" or passive because it is not a phallus. Instead, women should also be viewed as sexual agents capable of desiring and receiving pleasure. Using Irigaray to read Stein reveals the utopian quality Stein finds within the female body and the lesbian erotic. Stein embraces lesbian sexuality and lesbian pleasure, foregrounding women's sexual experiences and rejecting their negation through the lack of a phallus. Read through the lens of Irigaray's theories, Woolf's work acts as a rejection of the phallogocentric order. Although Woolf deemphasizes Orlando's sexual body, Woolf foregrounds her social experiences and thoughts as a woman. In contrast, Woolf also deemphasizes the masculine body as well as the masculine experience, as Orlando's husband is rarely heard from throughout the second half of the novel. The lack of a prominent masculine perspective further highlights Orlando's feminine experience, defining femininity as its own identity rather than a negation of masculinity.

While many French feminists reject Freud's ideas outright, some American feminists have argued that Freud's theories may be helpful in understanding social dynamics. Despite Freud's biased interpretations, some feminists do not reject his theories completely. Scholars such as Nancy Chodorow have defended Freud's basic beliefs about gender identity while being aware of Freud's androcentric bias in his conclusions. Within her essay "Freud and Feminism," Chodorow argues that some of Freud's theories can help explain the socialization of women to

become passive and emotionally malleable to the needs of men. Freud's gender personality structure claims that men will identify with their father once they realize the horror of their mother's missing penis. This masculine identification causes men to then detach themselves from the mother figure and begin emotionally repressing themselves. In contrast, the girls will identify with their mothers via their shared lack of a phallus. However, they will begin to crave emotional connectivity with men, which they will ultimately not receive. This process of recognition and identification leads not to a solid masculine identity, but rather to a malleable female one that allows women to become emotionally available to men. In her engagement with this theory, Chodorow argues that "Freud gives us a theory concerning how people – men and women – become gendered and sexed, how femininity and masculinity develop, how sexual inequality is reproduced" (Lorber anthology, 172). Thus, Freud's theories, which admittedly contain his own personal biases, give feminists the tools with which to analyze their socialization and its subsequent oppressions. Using Chodorow to read Stein and Woolf, this project will reveal elements of social construction within gender and sexuality. Chodorow's assertion that gendered roles are largely social constructions sheds new light on Stein's rejection of heteronormative assumptions and their implicit denigration of lesbian sexuality. Chodorow's theories are particularly useful in analyzing Woolf's commentary on the harmful effects of assumed gender essentialism. Chodorow argues that gendered roles and expectations are culturally reproduced ways that become harmful to women and creates a phallogocentric culture. Reading Woolf through the lens of Chodorow's theories reveals that Woolf's recognition of socially constructed gender also reveals the sexism embedded within these roles.

Although both authors' works critique several aspects of Freudian theory, the largest commonality between them is their treatment of scopophilia and the male gaze. Film theorists have used Freud's theories in order to analyze the ways in which characters are gendered and represented. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film critic, focuses on Freud's ideas of voyeurism and scopophilia. She claims that films, an outlet for partaking in pleasurable voyeurism, rely on sexualizing and fetishizing women as a means to cope with men's castration anxiety. Freud claims that young boys' realization that some people do not possess a phallus causes an internal sense of panic at their own potential phallic loss. In order to subvert this anxiety, men will fetishize women's bodies and sexuality to create a non-threatening form of the feminine. Mulvey calls this fetishization the "male gaze," which inevitably also creates a sexual imbalance and an active male/passive female dichotomy. Strongly rejecting this male gaze in *Tender Buttons*, Stein denies the reader the ability to create a mental image, instead having to gaze at the words themselves. Using Mulvey's theories to analyze Stein's text reveals Stein's playfulness with fetishization. The emphasis on physical objects causes Stein, and subsequently the reader, to act as the fetishist, allowing women to become the desiring subjects. The multiplicity of the fetishized objects also allows for a broader definition of desire, in contrast to the narrow desiring scope Mulvey analyzes within Freud's theories. For her part, Woolf demonstrates the pleasure of looking but critiques the problematically gendered dichotomy created by it. Within Woolf's works, Mulvey's analysis allow the reader to see the gender reversal Woolf establishes, as the Queen acts as the gazing subject and Orlando as the gazed upon object. This reversal places the reader in a position to notice the problematic aspects of the gaze and the imbalanced power dynamic created between the two characters.

In addition to offering a critique of heteronormativity throughout their works, Stein and Woolf also propose alternative worlds of feminine desire. In considering these utopian alternatives, I will begin to use later twentieth-century gender theorists to read both works. Stein's and Woolf's innovative literary forms allow them to create a feminized literary sphere, especially through their use of fragmentation. While *Tender Button* clearly uses fragmentation of subject matter throughout the poem's different sections, Woolf also uses a fragmented narrative process and skewed chronological understanding of the text's plot. The deviation from expected poetic and biographic/narrative structures begins to deviate from a patriarchal assumption of literary form, creating a space where female desire and sexuality can be expressed more openly. Within these alternative worlds, both authors emphasize feminine agency, rather than portraying woman as a passive object. Reading Stein and Woolf through the lens of later twentieth-century gender theorists, I will consider the radical innovations both authors propose.

Stein's and Woolf's assertion of gender as a social construct also begins to reveal the performative qualities required to sustain and reproduce gendered roles. Using Judith Butler's gender theories to read these works, this project will argue that Stein and Woolf present extremely radical ideas about gender. In "Gender Regulations" from *Undoing Gender*, Butler defines gender regulations as "indifferent to the actions that it governs" (42). She also claims that "the [gender] norm appears to have a status and effect that is independent of the actions governed by the norm" (42). The gender binary of man/woman stems from socially regulated gender norms. These norms eventually become socially ingrained so as to make the "thinkability of its disruption" (43) seem unnatural. These norms are created then through a

process of structural performativity, and the regulation of gender subsequently regulates the actions and “cultural intelligibility” of individuals (52). Butler further argues that transgressions of a clear sex binary, such as intersex individuals, necessitate correction, often through the form of corrective surgeries (55). Butler’s theories not only reveal the socially constructed elements of gender, but they also assert that these social constructions are upheld through one’s compliance to regulated gendered norms. Stein’s and Woolf’s reversal of gendered positions indicate gender’s performative aspects. Stein’s fetishization of multiple objects performatively creates a masculine identity, which allows the emphasis on femininity and female sexuality to further challenge assumed gendered boundaries. Similarly, Woolf’s emphasis on Orlando’s intellect exposes gender’s performative aspect. Although Orlando becomes a woman, she continues to engage in the masculine realm. Confronting the reader with Orlando’s feminine body but male subjectivity, Woolf reveals women’s ability to divert and reject enacting gender.

Stein’s and Woolf’s portrayal of gender ambiguity act to point out gender regulations and legitimize non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality. In her book *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam, a late twentieth-century gender theorist, examines the “inverted” gender roles more closely, analyzing the roles of the “female husband” and “tribade” in the nineteenth century. She defines this position as “women who played husband to married women who were either abandoned or neglected by their male husbands” (67). The “female husband” also corresponds to earlier conceptions of lesbian desire, as Halberstam notes that this figure was almost always masculine and could also indicate “outright female transvestism” (67). This particular title also became useful in avoiding the term lesbian, or “sapphist,” and thus also the stigma attached to the label (65). Halberstam comments on the tribade’s role,

defining it as a woman who finds sexual pleasure in the “friction of rubbing a clitoris on another persons’ thigh, pubic bone, hip, buttocks, or any other fleshly surface” (59). She notes the similarities between tribadic movement and penetrative sex, which caused tribadic pleasure to be seen as masculine and a form of sexual perversion. Stein’s utopia view of lesbian sexuality implies tribadic pleasure within her writing, and asserts that tribadic pleasure is greater than penetrative sex. Her rejection of penetrative sex negates the male presence in regards to sexual desire and emphasizes a specifically lesbian form of sexuality. Orlando’s gender change and feelings about marriage also challenge the definition of gendered spousal roles as does the “female husband.”

In representing ambiguous sexual orientations, both Stein and Woolf challenge the gender system more broadly. The expected “Mannish Lesbian” figure disappears, and aspects of pleasure or happiness are emphasized instead. The refutation of an explicit heterosexuality removes women from an inherently gendered system based around patriarchal tendencies. Instead, Stein’s and Woolf’s alternative worlds argue that gender is a socially constructed concept that limits women’s ability to express sexual desire and pleasure. This project will analyze the extent to which Stein and Woolf critique heteronormativity, but it will also ask how they create alternative, non-heteronormative worlds. What do these alternatives consist of and how do they challenge established standards of sexuality? Through my analysis, I will suggest that these two very different texts are linked through their shared critique of heteronormativity. I will also argue that Stein’s initial vision of a lesbian utopia acts as a foundational tool for Woolf’s assertions about gender. By destabilizing heteronormative assumptions and legitimizing lesbian sexual desire and pleasure, Woolf is able to explore the

underlying causes of women's limited sexuality. In challenging the established system of gender, Woolf also implicitly expands the possibilities for feminine desire that may or may not include heterosexuality. Yet, de-gendering also expands the possibilities for feminine intellect and its legitimization within the academic and literary worlds.

Chapter One:

“Such Beautiful Beautiful”: Lesbian and Sexual Celebration in

Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*

Gertrude Stein’s lesbianism was arguably one of the worst kept secrets in the Parisian art world during the early twentieth-century. Although *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* implicitly reveals Toklas’ and Stein’s relationship and their interactions with the art elite, Stein could never publically share her desire for her feminine partner. Instead, Stein expressed her desire only through opaque or unpublished poetry. In *Tender Buttons* Stein expresses her desire for women and critiques the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality in sexual and romantic relationships. In its first half, this chapter will analyze Stein’s critique of heteronormativity. Stein suggests that heterosexuality restricts female sexual desire and creates an imbalanced power dynamic between men and women. Extending her critique of heteronormativity into common theories of sexuality, Stein also engages with several of Freud’s theories of inversion and his depictions of a dominantly masculine sexuality. *Tender Buttons* seeks to undermine Freud’s ideas of the male fetishist by fetishizing multiple objects and by implicitly placing women into the role of desiring subject. Using later twentieth-century gender theorists, the first half of this chapter will argue that Stein’s text rejects Freud’s limited recognition of female desire and pleasure. Moreover, Stein also deviates from Freudian theory in her emphasis on the sonic and aural aspects of language. Rejecting the scopophilic obsessions of Freudian thought, Stein plays with words’ sounds and encourages the reader to take pleasure in the aural and tactile sensations of language.

However, Stein does not only offer critiques throughout *Tender Buttons*; rather, as I will argue in the second half of this chapter, she also offers alternative forms of desire and pleasure. Section two will consider Stein's exploration of consumer desire, as she revels in the appropriation of advertising language. Stein uses the insistent repetition and sophisticated language of early twentieth-century advertisements to explore feminine-centric forms of desire. Portraying an excess of consumer desire, Stein's work rejects expectations of frugality and celebrates desire in various forms. Ultimately, as I will go on to argue, Stein's emphasis on consumer desire allows her to introduce lesbian sexual desire as an alternative to heterosexuality. Using elements of advertising language and sexual euphemisms, Stein depicts intense sexual pleasure with other women throughout *Tender Buttons*. Lesbian relationships allow Stein to reject heteronormativity and the restrictions it places onto female desire and pleasure. Stein's vision of lesbian sexuality thus becomes a utopian world, in which women can fully express their sexuality without restriction.

Before turning to Stein's critique of Freud, I will begin by offering a preliminary discussion of Stein's use of language to depict desire and pleasure. Using euphemisms and coded words, Stein foregrounds feminine sexual desire and experiences. For example, Stein's poetic subset entitled "Salad Dressing and an Artichoke," reads:

Please pale hot, please cover rose, please acre in the red
stranger, please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel
faces.

The first line, "Please pale hot," immediately denotes the poem's sexual connotations, as the

reference to a “pale” and “hot” subject implies sexual tension. The word “hot” can be interpreted as an indication of sexual desire and “pale” recalls images of flushing from orgasm. Stein’s reference to the “red stranger” further implies sexual desire as Elizabeth Frost has noted that Stein often used the color red to denote sexuality (12). Further, the last line, “please butter all the beef-steak with regular feel/faces,” portrays the act of oral sex. The meat of the beef-steak implies flesh on both the cow and human body, while buttering meat is meant to make it more tender and less dry. The act of wetting the meat becomes an identifiable euphemism to female sexual arousal, but Stein’s inclusion of the phrase “regular feel faces” can also be read as an allusion to oral sex performed on a woman. The emphasis on food and, subsequently, the mouth further indicates that this scene is a description of oral sex. In addition to the explicit nature of Stein’s poetry, she also expresses her own sexual pleasure. The repeated inclusion of the word “please” acknowledges that the sexual acts are actively desired and enjoyed.

Additionally, Stein’s emphasis on female desire and pleasure rejects masculine forms of sexuality. Within the same poetic subset, the phrase “please acre in the red stranger” (492) utilizes “acre’s” obsolete meaning. According to the OED the word “acre” previously meant to challenge someone to a duel. The violence and aggression associated with a duel is associated more with masculinity and masculine sexuality; yet, her reference to the subject as a “stranger” indicates the lack of men’s presence. Stein also implies the lack of vaginal penetration within the poem. The line “please cover rose,” in addition to the heavy implications of cunnilingus, denotes clitoral rather than vaginal imagery. The folds of rose petals create a similar image to the folds of a clitoris, and the desire to “cover” the “rose” emphasizes clitoral stimulation over

penetrative sex. This emphasis focuses solely on a feminine form of pleasure, rejecting the necessity of a masculine body to receive sexual pleasure.

Stein's rejection of masculine sexuality also uses mocking language to begin revealing her critique of heteronormativity. Within the poetic subset "Cutlet," Stein writes:

A blind agitation is manly and uttermost (470).

The "blind agitation" Stein refers to can be interpreted as sexual arousal, but her description that it is "manly and uttermost" also indicates her awareness that sexuality is considered masculine. Stein mocks this awareness by suddenly employing sophisticated language to describe it as "uttermost." The contrast between high and common language causes Stein's writing to sound sarcastic, mocking both masculine sexuality and the gendered assumptions about sexual desire. The term "uttermost" also recognizes that "manly" sexuality is considered necessary to a woman's sexual experiences. In addition to her rejection of masculine sexuality, the sarcasm evident in the poem begins to mock the assumption that all women are heterosexual and receive pleasure from men. Moreover, Stein's use of masculine language within the context of an emphasized feminine perspective acts to challenge gendered assumptions about sexuality. By combining moments of explicit sexuality as well as an emphasis on feminine sexual experiences, Stein forces the reader to recognize female sexuality and sexual agency.

In addition to challenging a heteronormative culture that largely ignores female sexuality, Stein also critiques heterosexual relationships as restrictive and oppressive to women. Within the beginning of "Rooms," Stein writes:

Something that is an erection is that which stands and feeds and silences a tin which is swelling. This makes no diversion that is to say what can please exaltation, that which is cooking (499).

Stein's reference to an "erection" in the first line of the paragraph makes a clear reference to the presence of male sexuality and heterosexuality. Stein describes the erection as "that which stands and feeds and silences a tin which is swelling." The "standing" erection denotes male anatomy, but the "tin which is swelling," can be interpreted as a woman's vagina and sexual arousal. However, Stein claims that the erection "feeds and silences" female desire. The act of feeding indicates heterosexuality in its references to the act of the female body's "consumption" of the phallic object. Although the "silencing" can be read as the diffusion of female sexuality through receiving pleasure, "silencing" also implies a restriction or oppression of female desire within a heterosexual context. This second reading is strengthened by the line "this makes no diversion that is to say what can please exaltation." Stein's claim that male sexuality "makes no diversion" and does not give her "exaltation," rejects heterosexuality as the only form of pleasure. Instead, assumed heterosexuality restricts Stein's ability to express sexual desire and pleasure that do not fit into heteronormative categories. Further, the masculine sexuality as the "silencing" force places men as the dominant figure. The hierarchical positioning Stein calls the reader's attention to reveals imbalanced power dynamics inherent to heterosexual relationships. Thus, Stein not only rejects the masculine gendering of sexuality, she also heavily critiques heterosexuality as an oppressive institution towards women.

Through her critique of restrictive and imbalanced heterosexuality, Stein engages with multiple theories of gender and sexuality in the early 1900's. Although many sexologists were writing during this time period, Stein predominantly focuses on a critique of Sigmund Freud's heteronormative and patriarchal theories of sexuality. Elizabeth Frost convincingly argues that Stein mocks Freud's theories of fetishism, focusing on multiple fetishized objects and allowing the female reader, or Stein herself as an author, to become a female fetishist (19). Freud defines the act of fetishization in "The Sexual Aberrations," writing that "a fetish is determined by a symbolic connection of thought, of which the person concerned is usually not conscious" (155). Although the fetishist may not be fully aware of the connection, Freud insists that some connection between the fetishized object and the sexual object must exist. However, Stein parodies Freud's work through the sheer variety of objects she "fetishizes." Within the "Objects" section, examples of fetishized objects include "A Sound," "A Table," "A White Hunter," and "A Petticoat." The multiple objects that are being fetishized bolster Frost's argument that the multiplicity itself constitutes a parody, and the lack of a coherent connection between the different objects further parodies Freud's ideas of fetishism. Stein's use of multiple disconnected objects also breaks down the connection between the fetishized and sexual objects, subsequently challenging Freud's theories. Even in the examples listed above, their connection to a single desiring subject seems impossible. Stein also refuses to give the reader a coherent thing to fetishize in poetic subsets such as "Suppose an Eyes." Instead of a concrete thing, Stein begins to unsettle the reader's expectations by using increasingly abstract concepts as the fetishized object. The reader's inability to connect the fetishes to a single desiring subject indicates Stein's rejection of Freud's rigid expressions of desire and sexuality.

Rather than focus on a single fetish or object of desire, Stein expands the possibility of desire and sexuality beyond Freudian theory.

Stein also causes language itself to become the fetishized object, encouraging the reader to fetishize words as signifiers. Stein's use of word repetition and break down of cohesive meaning creates desire for the words themselves, rather than their signified meanings.

For example, in a section of "A Chair," Stein writes:

Hope, what is a spectacle, a spectacle is the resemblance
Between the circular side place and nothing else, nothing else.
To choose it is ended, it is actual and more and more than
that it has it certainly has the same treat, and a seat all that is
Practiced and more easily much more easily ordinarily (468).

Throughout this short excerpt of the poetic subset, Stein repeats single words, such as "spectacle," and phrases, such as "nothing else." Stein also repeats word groupings, such as "it is actual and more and more than that it has it certain has." Noticeably, these words do not reference any part of a chair; instead, the repetition creates desire for the language rather than its meaning. Thus, Stein reverses the expected signified/signifier relationship by giving precedence to the signifier and its sound. This pleasure within language further rejects Freud's fetishization theories. Freud claims that the fetish, the signifier, must stand in for a sexual object, the signified; however, Stein asserts that the signifier can act as the fetish. This play with word fetishism further rejects the rigid sexual standards Freudian theory implies and expands the ways in which one may experience sexual attraction and pleasure.

Stein's critique of Freud's fetishization theories also extends into the scopophilic fetishization of the woman's body by a male subject. Freud's explanation for the male gaze stems from men's castration anxiety, in which women are fetishized in order to avoid the anxiety their lack of a penis causes. Notably, this theory indicates that only men are in positions to become the voyeuristic lookers, and women must be the looked upon objects. The heading of each poem within *Tender Buttons* sets the reader's expectations for a physical description of the object, allowing them to gaze at the image through mental visualization. However, Stein denies the reader this ability by the obscure descriptions, often never mentioning the object or a recognizable trait. For example, "Cucumber" reads:

Not a razor less, not a razor, ridiculous pudding, red and
relet put in, rest in a slender go in selecting, rest in, rest
in white widening (493).

Although the poem's title indicates that the subject is a cucumber, the words themselves do not actually describe its physical characteristics. The "slender go in selecting" may reference the cucumber's shape and the "white widening" may indicate the white interior, but this passage is not an explicit description. Phrases such as "ridiculous pudding" also deny the cucumber's subject position as a fetishized object. The title defines the subject as a cucumber, but the sudden subject shift to "pudding" further defies the reader's ability to mentally visualize and fetishize a single object. The use of the word "red" to describe the cucumber also misleads the reader's visualization because it deviates from the expected visual image. In her refusal to describe these "objects," Stein rejects the gaze's objectifying abilities.

Stein further subverts the problematic aspects of the gaze by describing the objects through negation. The loss of the ability to create a single mental image breaks down the gaze's authority and asserts female sexual agency. Stein playfully parodies the gaze in "Objects" through poetic subsets such as "A Purse:"

A purse was not green, it was not straw color, it was hardly
seen and it had a use a long use and the chain, the chain was
never missing, it was not misplaced, it showed that it was
open, that is all that it showed (469).

The gaze is meant to create a cohesive visual image of the object being looked at; however, Stein intentionally avoids the gaze by describing the purse through negation. Although the reader may ascertain that the purse "was not green" or "straw color," the actual color of the purse is never shared. Similarly, her description of the chain as "never missing" and "not misplaced" does not provide the reader with any details of the purse's appearance. The only positive aspect of the purse's description one might find is that it was open and "that is all that it showed." Stein sets up the reader's expectations of a concrete description in the poem's title but then subverts the objectification of the gazed upon object. The vaginal imagery implied by the phrase "open purse" underlines the subversion of the male gaze on the female body. Using descriptions of negation, Stein refuses to give the reader a concrete visual description and denies the reader the opportunity to sexually fetishize the woman's body.

Moreover, Stein's denial of the visual image extends into a larger critique of the imbalanced gender systems perpetuated throughout Freud's theories. Stein confronts the problematically gendered objectification in "Cups:"

Why is a cup a stir and a behave. Why is it so seen.
 A cup is readily shaded, it has in between no sense that is
 to say music, memory, musical memory (489).

Stein uses a “cup” to represent femininity and the female body, drawing on the metaphorical “chalice” often depicted as a representation of womanhood. Yet, Stein’s questioning of the “cup’s” treatment, or women’s treatment, reveals her heteronormative critique further. She asks “Why is a cup a stir and a behave,” referencing the strict behavior rules women are expected to conform to after creating a “stir.” Her next question, “why is it so seen,” references the male gaze upon women more explicitly, as the “cups” are gazed upon and subsequently placed into a submissive subject position. Stein also describes the cup as “readily shaded,” referencing the expected appearance of women as “readily” available to the needs and demands of the masculine voyeur. The emphasis on visual appearance also critiques the gaze, as it forces women into a subordinate position. Stein emphasizes the focus on women’s visual appearance by writing that “no sense that is/to say music, memory, musical memory.” Music falls into a more aural category, as it is heard rather than seen. Yet, the “cups” have “no sense” of this field, becoming entirely subjected to and defined by the visual male gaze.

Stein’s de-emphasis of the image also rejects patriarchal literary traditions in order to foreground her woman-centered experiences. In particular, Stein’s work reacts to the imagist aesthetic, as imagism’s emphasis on the visual aspect of poetry privileges the dominant male perspective within the literary field. The imagist aesthetic seeks to use language as a way to create clear visual images. In his essay “Imagism,” Patrick McGuiness specifically denotes the imagist aesthetic as a:

- 1 Direct treatment of the “thing” whether objective or subjective
- 2 To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
- 3 As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase not in sequence of a metronome (184)

Stein’s use of fragmentation and negation seeks to achieve the opposite of the imagists’ goal.

Stein does not give “direct treatment of the ‘thing,’” nor does she neglect words that would not “contribute to the presentation.” The imagist aesthetic that Stein rejects acts as a literary extension of the gaze because of its emphasis on creating an image through language. The connection between imagism and the gaze defines the imagist movement as part of a patriarchal tradition. In contrast to the imagist poets, Stein revels in the excess and obscurity language can create. Stein’s complete disavowal of the image’s importance actively mocks imagism while establishing an alternative, and more feminine, literary form.

Using later feminist critiques of Freud to read Stein’s writing, the reader can see Stein’s celebration in desire in multiple forms. In “This Sex Which is Not One,” Luce Irigaray denies the Freudian idea that women’s pleasure is limited to areas he denotes as “erogenous zones.”

Irigaray writes:

But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined – in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness (28).

While Freud suggests that erogenous zones exist to limit and contain pleasure to certain areas

of the body, Irigaray argues that women's pleasure cannot, and should not, be contained. Similarly, Stein's play on fetishization denies the contained sexuality Freud portrays. Her use of multiple fetishes and the wide diversity of objects – or, in some cases, abstract concepts – rejects the narrow idea of “sameness” in regards to sexual pleasure. Instead, these various fetishes represent and exalt the “far more diversified” aspects of women's pleasure, which Stein finds “almost anywhere” within the domestic sphere. Stein's infusion of more explicit sexual innuendos and the multiple objects within *Tender Buttons* argues for a similar expansion of feminine desire. In contrast to Freud, Stein rejects limitations placed on desire and celebrates pleasure created through multiple sources.

In her expansion of desire, Stein also focuses on the sensory pleasure created through spoken language. Using techniques such as alliteration, Stein encourages tactile pleasure through her playful language. Within the context of my analysis, I will use the word “tactile” to denote “mouth-feel,” which focuses on the physical movements of the tongue, lips, throat, etc. used in spoken language. Stein's use of language invites the reader to read it out loud and experience the tactile sensations within the mouth of the various sounds. In “Asparagus,” the last line “wet wet weather wet weather wet” uses alliteration to invite the reader to participate in the pleasure of repeated sounds (491). Read out loud, the alliteration becomes reminiscent of childhood tongue twisters, meant to create physical pleasure from the repeated “W” sound. In addition to the implications of female arousal and desire through the associations with the word “wet,” Stein encourages the reader to actually experience physical pleasure through mouth-feel. Similar to Irigaray, Stein rejects the limitations of pleasure to the specified erogenous zones that Freud asserts. Instead, Stein uses the mouth-feel of language to play

with, explore, and celebrate pleasure in other parts of the body. Despite many modernists' goal of avoiding physical pleasure, Stein uses tactile pleasure to encourage physical pleasure through language.

Although the denial of the visual inevitably creates a less masculine literary space, Stein consciously uses language's aural and tactile components to create a feminine literary sphere. Rather than using words to signify meaning, the words are meant to signify sound and their aural relationships. In the poem "Apple," Stein writes:

Apple plum, carpet steak, seed clam, colored wine, calm
seen, cold cream, best shake, potato, potato and no no gold
work with pet, a green seen is called bake and change sweet
is bready, a little piece a little piece please (488).

Stein plays with the interior syllables of words and alliteration to emphasize the aural sounds of the words. The phrases "seed clam" and "calm seen" pun on each other, rearranging or replacing a single letter to emphasize language's aural component. The phrase "cold cream" also plays on the phrase "calm seen" through the use of inexact rhyming. These techniques create a rhythmic flow to the poem's progression, further focusing the reader's attention on the way the words sound in relation to each other. Stein also employs repetition and alliteration, in phrases such as "potato, potato and no no gold," and "a little piece a little piece please." In addition to encouraging tactile pleasure from saying the words, Stein emphasizes their specific sounds instead of their meaning or image. Thus, Stein not only rejects the visual realm as an oppressive masculine sphere; she also proposes an alternative world of aural and tactile pleasure for women's sexuality.

Stein's alternative world of female desire and pleasure can also be read through Jacques Lacan's theories to depict language as a sight of plenitude and desire, rather than loss. Freud argues that an infant's recognition of his own image in a mirror causes a struggle between the feelings of internal fragmentation and the appearance of an outward unity. Lacan then builds on this Freudian theory to further argue that this moment not only separates the infant's connection to the mother; it also introduces the infant to the symbolic order of language (735). Thus, within Lacan's theory, language becomes a site of immense loss. However, Stein refutes this idea by casting language as desirable and pleasurable. Rather than a symbol of loss, Stein portrays language as a site of excess, plenitude and pleasure. Throughout several poetic subsets, Stein invites the reader to experience tactile and aural sensations and pleasure through the sounds of language and the way it feels when spoken. Stein's celebration of language in both written and spoken forms further expands women's opportunity to express desire outside of heteronormative confines. This expansion creates a greater sense of female sexual agency through language, further indicating that language is not indicative of loss.

In addition to Freud's theories, Stein's poetry also critiques the theories of lesser known twentieth-century sexologists. Stein's rejection of compulsory heterosexuality challenges the idea that sexuality and gender are inherently linked to one another. Esther Newton uses the theories of prominent sexologist Richard Krafft-Ebbing to characterize the early twentieth-century notions of lesbianism as a form of inversion. Newton explains:

Like most important historical developments, the symbolic fusion of gender reversal and homosexuality as over determined. God Himself had ordained gender hierarchy and heterosexuality at the Creation. The idea that men who had sex with other men were like women was not new. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, the emerging medical profession gave scientific sanction to tradition; homosexual behavior, the doctors agreed, was both symptom and cause of male effeminacy . . . because sexual desire was not considered inherent in women, the lesbian was endowed with a trapped male soul that phallicized her, giving her active lust (95).

The implication of Newton's historical summary is that sexuality was seen as inherently tied to gender and gender expression. A woman could not legitimately be attracted to another woman, according to these theories, because she was internally male. However, Stein's depiction of masculine sexuality with feminine subject positions challenges the reader's understanding of the gender binary. Stein blurs the lines between a definitively masculine and feminine sexuality in order to defy heteronormativity. Because heterosexuality is based on the genders of both partners, heterosexuality's definition becomes obscured through Stein's placement of women into the masculine role of desiring subject. Her rejection of heterosexuality as an inherently unequal system then further challenges the stereotypical portrayal of the "Mannish Lesbian" (Newton, 89) and the "invert." In doing so, Stein breaks down gendered binaries and subsequently legitimizes specifically non-heterosexual expressions of desire and pleasure.

Although Stein critiques heteronormativity, she does not reject expressions of sexual desire. Instead, as I will go on to suggest in the second part of this chapter, Stein proposes an alternative to heteronormativity by creating a utopian vision of



Figure 1

lesbian sexuality. In this section, I will analyze Stein's portrayal of consumer and lesbian desire and pleasure as an alternative to heterosexuality. Throughout *Tender Buttons*, Stein plays with the same style of language as advertisements. Within the 1914 advertisement for Coca-Cola in (Figure 1), the company has used several techniques in order to create consumerist desire and encourage pleasure through actually purchasing the product. The phrase "A Man's Drink, A Woman's Drink, Everybody's Drink" embedded in the corner uses ideas of repetition in order to force the idea of a drink into the consumer's conscience, thereby creating desire for the product. Examples of fragmentation can also be found in short phrases such as "vigorously



Figure 2

good - - and keenly delicious. Thirst-quenching and refreshing."

These choppy phrases create short, easily memorized fragments, to create a collage effect and link the product to a positive association by using positive words. Noticeably, the advertisement also includes

moments of more complex vocabulary. Words such as "vigorously" and "keenly" add a sense of sophistication to the product. Similar techniques can be found in an advertisement for rye whiskey (Figure 2). Paralleling the Coca-Cola ad, this ad also uses fragmentation, exemplified in the phrases "hand-made," "sour mash," and "straight pure rye." In addition to the use of collage phrases, the phrase "straight pure rye" creates a prominent "R" sound, causing delight, and desire, through alliterative tendencies.

In her poetry, Stein appropriates advertising and consumerist language to portray female desire in a socially accepted form. The poetic subset, "Suppose an Eyes," exemplifies many of the advertising techniques discussed above. Stein writes:

Go red go red, laugh white.
 Suppose a collapse in rubbed purr, in rubbed purr get.
 Little sales ladies little sales ladies little saddles of mut-
 Ton.
 Little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful
 Beautiful (475).

As Frost has noted previously, the mention of the color “red” in the passage immediately implies Stein’s reference to sexuality. The phrase “Little sales ladies” is repeated three times with a final variation of “little saddles of mutton,” calling attention to the idea of shopping and consumerism. The repetition of the phrases also mimics the language of the Coca-Cola advertisement in order to create desire for both the “mutton” and “little sales ladies.” The final line, “little sales of leather and such beautiful beautiful, beautiful/beautiful” continues the references to the “sales.” The repetition and positive association of the word “beautiful” creates desire for the “leather” Stein describes. The “beautiful” “leather,” or flesh, that is being sold thereby infuses sexuality within Stein’s portrayal of consumerism. Stein’s references to sexuality within the consumerist context are amplified by her reference to a “rubbed purr,” implying clitoral stimulation. Using sexual language in conjunction with consumerist language allows Stein to explore specifically feminine forms of desire. Additionally, Stein’s use of consumerist desire allows female sexuality to expand beyond the parameters set by heteronormative expectations.

Stein’s appropriation of consumerist and advertising language also rejects the notion that feminine desire must be contained. Although women were allowed, and expected, to experience consumerist desire, the emphasis on thrift and frugality also worked to actively

suppress that desire. As Stein utilizes the language of an appropriately gendered space of desire, she also refutes the notion that this desire must be restricted. As Kathryn Kent notes:

The poem [*Tender Buttons*] takes on the economic value of bourgeois culture, in particular the emphasis placed on thrift (often a central theme in nineteenth-century domestic handbooks and, as I have noted, one that is carried over into the early-twentieth-century Girl Scout handbook), as well as conservation and cleanliness. *Tender Buttons* thus deconstructs these values from their supposed opposites (profligacy, waste, and dirt) . . . (141).

As consumerist desire is considered appropriate, and expected of women, Stein combats the idea that this desire should also be contained. The emphasis Kent notes on thrift and economic frugality becomes a limitation on the only desire women are allowed to experience, denying them the pleasure of satisfying their consumerist desire with a purchase. In reaction to these values, as Kent has noted, Stein deals in excess. The constant repetition used in her poetry allows Stein to revel in unconstrained language. Stein's descriptions of multiple objects also demonstrate her portrayal of excess. The pleasure Stein takes in these objects also adds to her celebration of excess and rejection of restricted desire. Instead, Stein denies claims that female desire needs to be repressed and controlled.

Kent's argument can be extended by noting that Stein does more than just critique the values of contemporary bourgeois culture; Stein also refutes the limitations placed on female desire. Using an excess of language, Stein celebrates both consumerist and sexual desire. Stein exemplifies this excess in the poem "Chicken:"

Stick stick call then, stick stick sticking, sticking with a chicken. Sticking in a extra succession, sticking in (493).

As Kent notes, Stein employs moments of linguistic excess, using gratuitous word repetition of the word “stick,” or its variation, “sticking.” The word “sticking” implies penetration, and its constant repetition also invokes the technique employed by advertisements to create consumerist desire. Stein uses the word excessively, reveling in the desire - both sexual and consumerist - that the words create. Thus, Stein’s gratuitous use of language celebrates excess rather than conforming to the ideals of “thrift” circulating in the early 1900’s. Although frugality specifically referred to economic savings, Stein indicates these ideals also extend into limiting women’s desire. By using an excess of language to depict consumer and sexual desire, Stein rejects the societal restrictions placed onto women’s bodies and sexuality.

The combination of consumerist and sexual desire legitimizes female and non-heterosexuality while finding pleasure in multiple forms of desire. Although many writers of Stein’s era tend to shy away from mundane actions and ideas of consumerist capitalism, Stein actually embraces these mainstream ideas to further her own thoughts about female sexuality. Through the appropriation of advertising language, Stein forces her desires and sexuality into consumerist and capitalist’s legitimized and accepted place within society. The use of a socially accepted and widely recognized language legitimizes women’s sexuality because it places it into the public sphere. The use of advertising language to allude to sexuality also implies that Stein enjoys consumer desire as well as sexual desire. Thus, Stein not only expands female sexual desire beyond early twentieth-century limitations; she also uses consumer and sexual language to create pleasure in the experience of desire itself.

Stein's alternative to heteronormativity also rejects socially reproduced gender norms in order to lift the restrictions placed onto women's desires and bodies. In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler writes:

To the extent that gender norms are *reproduced*, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation . . .

One important sense of regulation, then, is that persons are regulated by gender, and that this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person. To veer from the gender norm is to produce the aberrant example that regulatory powers . . . may quickly exploit to shore up the rational for their own continuing regulatory zeal (52)

Stein invokes and reproduces certain gendered norms and expectations in the form of allusions to sexual and consumerist desires; however, her assertion of sexual desire within a feminine subject position challenges socially regulated assumptions of women's passive sexuality. In doing so, Stein further denies the social "regulatory powers" that limit people to their gendered roles. Notably, much of the sexology and psychoanalytic research of the early twentieth-century indicates a belief in strict gender roles and gender's connection to sexuality. Stein therefore critiques heteronormativity's reliance on socially constructed gendered roles and characteristics. By combining sexuality and feminine perspectives, Stein allows women significantly more freedom to express their sexuality and desires. This freedom allows Stein to propose less expected forms of desire.

Stein not only denotes a female-centric form of desire, she also begins to explore pleasure in non-heterosexual ways. Her allusions to consumer and sexual desire expand

beyond heterosexuality to include desire for other women. Her poetic subset “Asparagus” aptly combines both of these aspects, in which she writes:

Asparagus in a lean in a lean to hot. This makes it art and it
is wet wet weather wet weather wet (491).

The seeming mundane nature of an asparagus stalk indicates Stein’s glorification of everyday objects, creating a similarity between Stein’s language and that of advertising. Stein also plays with the idea of a lean-to hut, changing syllables to “lean to hot.” The inclusion of agricultural imagery, especially as asparagus must come from an agricultural center, juxtaposes the sophisticated language expected in poetic forms. Stein’s next line “This makes it art” continues to elevate the common objects to the status of “art.” These elevations Stein employs act to further denote desire within the poetry because the high-class attachment makes the object seem more sophisticated and appealing. The phrase “wet wet weather wet weather wet” also employs the use of alliteration to create desire for the portrayed product. In addition to the constant allusions to marketing techniques, Stein still infuses her poetry with sexual desire. The line “wet wet weather wet weather wet,” while using alliteration, also draws connotations to feminine sexual arousal, and the repetition of the word “wet” implies a specifically feminine form of arousal. Thus, the advertising techniques Stein employs to create desire for the asparagus also works to create feminine sexual desire. Notably, Stein emphasizes female desire without referencing a masculine subject. The intentional rejection of a masculine presence rejects notions of female sexuality as dependent upon male sexuality; instead, it allows female desire to move beyond a heterosexual context into a lesbian realm of sexuality.

Stein's emphasis on female desire and pleasure becomes increasingly explicit in their implications of lesbian sexuality. Many of Stein's poems emphasize clitoral stimulation instead of vaginal penetration as a source of feminine pleasure. Stein's portrayal and emphasis on the clitoris begins to define Stein's sexuality as tribadic. As Judith Halberstam writes in *Female Masculinity*, a tribade refers to a woman who prefers "rubbing a clitoris on another person's thigh, pubic bone, hip, buttocks, or any other fleshy surface" in order to obtain sexual gratification (59). "Peeled Pencil, Choke" references tribadic desire and clitoral stimulation explicitly. Stein writes:

Rub her coke (476).

The reference to a rubbing action references the source of tribadic pleasure lesbian women can engage in. The word "coke" also becomes a substitution for the word clitoris, employing the harsh "c" sound in the beginning of each word. However, the simple, short statement also acts to legitimize the sexual pleasure created through clitoral stimulation. Halberstam notes a court case in which two school teachers accused of tribadism were eventually acquitted because "the judges believed, women could not give each other orgasmic pleasure and especially not in this tribadic mode" (63). Instead, a woman's gaining of sexual pleasure without being penetrated – either by a penis or a masculine woman's enlarged clitoris – was not considered a legitimate expression of sexual desire or pleasure. Stein directly confronts this notion about female sexuality by acknowledging the desire to rub/be rubbed by other women.

Stein furthers her assertion of lesbian and tribadic pleasure by claiming its superiority to vaginal penetration. In the poem "Red Roses," Stein writes:

A cool red rose and a pink cut pink, a collapse and a sold hole, a little less hot.

Rather than playing with a prominent “C” sound as “coke” does, Stein alludes to the clitoris through the image of a rose. As Frost has already noted, the color red indicates sexuality, marking the rose as a sexual symbol in its introduction. Yet, the imagery of a rose’s folded petals parallels the imagery of the folds of skin in a clitoris. The “pink cut pink” furthers the vaginal image as it represents the lips of a labia and a “sold hole” becomes indicative of a vagina. Stein also refers to a “collapse” of the sold hole, implying the experience of a vaginal orgasm. Stein’s use of the word “sold” to denote an orgasm also uses consumer language to indicate sexuality. The selling and buying of a product indicates the pleasurable conclusion of consumerist desire, which Stein uses to portray the pleasurable conclusion of a sexual exchange and vice versa. However, she describes the vaginal orgasm as “a little less hot,” using the term “hot” to pun on colloquial terms for sexual pleasure. She does not denote displeasure, but “a little less hot” implies that she receives less pleasure from vaginal penetration than clitoral stimulation. Stein contradicts the early twentieth-century notion that vaginal orgasms indicate womanliness and maturity, and a clitoral orgasm indicates sexual immaturity. Instead, she claims that the clitoral orgasm is more pleasurable, and denies the need for male penetration in experience and enjoying sex.

Stein’s lesbian alternative to an imbalanced paradigm is strengthened by the expression of her feelings towards Alice Toklas and their successful and mutually happy relationship. Although Alice’s name is never mentioned explicitly within Stein’s writing, clever wordplay hints at her presence as Stein’s object of desire. Within “Cooking,” Stein writes:

Alas, alas the pull alas the bell alas the coach in china, alas
 The little put in leaf alas the wedding butter meat, alas the
 Receptacle, alas the back shape of mussle, mussle and soda (492).

The poetic subset's title, "Cooking," actually draws the first connection to Toklas, as she was often depicted cooking in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and eventually published her own set of cook books. Moreover, Stein also coyly indicates Toklas' presence through the inclusion and repetition of the word "alas." Stein plays with the word's pronunciation, which can change between "a lass," "all ass," and "Alice." Emphasizing this word indicates Toklas' femininity, "a lass," and the sexual implications Stein places onto her name through the allusions to "all ass." Stein's further references to Toklas as "wedding butter meat" and a "receptacle," continue to imply a sexual innuendo. The word "wedding" denotes a romantic connection while the "butter meat" refers to the tenderizing of flesh. The "receptacle," then becomes the consumer of the "wedding butter meat," insinuating a lesbian sexual attraction. In the final lines, as Stein describes the "back shape of mussle," she once again brings attention to her attraction to Toklas' rear end. Noticeably, the words throughout the poem remain decidedly playful, as Stein uses coy linguistic jokes in order to portray her attraction to Toklas. Therefore, Stein not only suggests lesbianism as an alternative to restrictive forms of heterosexuality; she also offers the reader to witness some of her personal pleasurable anecdotes of lesbian sexuality.

Stein's portrayal of a lesbian utopia for female sexuality, desire and pleasure also denotes the potential to reconnect to the lost mother figure as depicted within psychoanalytic

theory. Lacan argues that the fragmentation of the self that occurs upon seeing oneself in the mirror acts as the catalyst for the separation of the, assumedly male, infant and the mother.

Using Lacan to read Stein's work, the reader can see language as a way to connect women.

Stein exemplifies this connection in "Objects" and "Food," and in poetic subsets such as "Veal."

Stein writes:

Very well very well, washing is old, washing is washing.
Cold soup, cold soup clear and particular and a principal
a principal question to put into (492).

Stein takes phrases, such as "very well" and "cold soup," and repeats them. Although this repetition acts as an indication of desire, it also noticeably disjoins the sentence's meaning.

The disconnection between the poem's sentences results in a fragmented identity of the object, similar to Lacan's ideas of the infant's fragmented identity. The sudden introduction of "cold soup" and a "principal question" creates further ambiguities in the "Veal" subject's identity.

Stein's fragmentation of "Objects" and "Food" into various poetic subsets and rapidly changing subjects further denotes the idea of subject fragmentation. However, Stein's tone does not reflect the sense of mourning or loss that Lacan claims characterizes the mirror stage. The alliterative word play of "well" and "washing" repeated several times results in an upbeat, pleasurable, and humorous affect. Thus, language becomes a mode of joy and pleasure for Stein through its ability to portray lesbian desire.

Reading Stein's use of language through Lacan's theories also reveals language's ability to connect women. The idealized unity between women emphasizes Stein's depiction of

lesbian sexuality as a utopian alternative. Stein's deviations from expected poetic forms create a new and distinctive type of language, which moves away from patriarchal literary traditions as well as Lacan's views of language as the catalyst of disconnection. Although Lacan's theories specifically focus on the male infant's experiences, Stein uses language to foreground feminine perspective and experiences. Thus, language becomes an essential part of creating women's identities, rather than fragmenting them. Stein's alternative language also acts as a way to re-access intimate female relationships. Her language's emphasis on excess and repetition recreate desire and pleasure within their portrayal of lesbian relationships. Stein's depictions of sexual excess and pleasure use language to reveal moments of intimate connection between women instead of disconnection or loss.

If Stein's text is read through Hélène Cixous' theories, the reader can see Stein's depictions of pleasure in femininity and the female body as an expression of *jouissance*. This celebration of the female sexual body reveals Stein's vision of a lesbian utopia. Cixous explicitly rejects the notion of a single, homogeneous form of female sexuality often posited by early twentieth-century sexologists. Instead, she argues that "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible," and criticizes the phallogocentric order as a way to shame women out of their strength (Lorber, 176-177). In contrast to the phallogocentric world, Cixous encourages women to write as a way to reclaim their bodies and their sexuality. While acknowledging that writing was often considered something that only men can do, Cixous claims that feminine writing will foreground women's experience. By emphasizing women's standpoint, Cixous argues that the reader will realize "the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her

organs . . .” (178). Using Cixous to read Stein reveals the utopian quality Stein asserts through her celebration of the female body and sexual pleasure. While most early twentieth-Century sexologists focused predominantly on male sexuality, reading Stein through the lens of Cixous allows the reader to realize Stein’s lesbian utopia as reclamation of sexual pleasure and autonomy.

Stein’s assertion of lesbian pleasure and the extreme deviation from expected poetic forms ultimately allows her to make radical assertions against heteronormativity. The extreme fragmentation and repetition to the point of nonsensical meaning creates an opaque quality to her texts. Although this style of writing may initially cause difficulty for the reader, it also allows Stein to insert lesbian sexual desire and pleasure without risking accusations of obscenity or censorship. Instead, Stein is able to propose an extension of sexuality that does not necessarily follow heterosexual norms. This utopia subsequently gives women much more agency in their sexuality. Resisting patriarchal definitions of women’s bodies, and the assumption that women need and desire a phallus, Stein portrays women’s identities as autonomous. Stein uses a poetic platform to legitimize her own sexuality and rejects the pathologizing of lesbian sexuality. Although many of Stein’s more explicitly sexual works, such as “Lifting Belly” or “Pink Melon Joy” were not published until after her death, *Tender Buttons* was able to publically confront gender and sexual expectations that Stein saw as problematic. Undoubtedly, Stein’s portrayal of lesbian relationships during an era in which they were not taken seriously reveals the radical nature of her work. In addition to the highly experimental poetic styles she employs, Stein’s unsettling of heteronormative traditions embodies a progression of both artistic and sexual values.

Chapter Two:

“He Was a Woman”: Gender and Sexual Identity in

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*

As important as *Tender Buttons* is in its own right, this text also opens up the discussion of lesbianism for future authors. Although Stein’s experimental style allows her to avoid explicit references to lesbian sexuality, later female writers would begin to write lesbian narratives more openly. In the 1920’s Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, dedicated to Vita Sackville-West, and Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, whose main character would become the archetypal lesbian literary figure, were both published. These texts express lesbian sexuality and identity more explicitly, often to the public’s scrutiny. However, these later texts begin to critique more than just heteronormative sexual expectations; they also look at gender more critically and its assumed connection to sexuality. Stein’s *Tender Buttons* act as a foundation for the rejection of heteronormativity, and her assertions allow for even further exploration and commentary on gender and sexual identity.

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* was published fourteen years after Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, but Woolf makes many similar critiques of heteronormativity. In her exploration of gender and sexuality throughout the novel, Woolf comes to many of the same critical conclusions as Stein; however, Woolf’s alternative model of feminine identity seeks to expand the limitations placed on gender and sexual freedom. Many scholars have written on Woolf’s critique of gendered

expectations¹ and her response to Freudian theory² through Orlando's gender change. Using the novel's plot as a frame-work, this chapter will analyze *Orlando* in three parts. The first part will consider Orlando's life as a man and focus on Woolf's critique of heteronormative gender roles in this section of the text. Through Orlando's relationship with the Queen, Woolf employs the gaze, the commodification of the body, and her emphasis on Orlando's male physicality to critique women's roles within a heteronormative society. Woolf's response also critiques many of the theories established by twentieth-century sexologists, especially Freud. Moving onto the novel's next stage, the second section of this chapter will analyze Orlando as a woman as she transitions into her new social role. While Orlando remains in Turkey, she presents a more androgynous gender identity. Although she has become a woman physically, she continues to dress in more masculine clothing and retains her masculine personality. Finally, as Orlando prepares to return to England, Woolf describes the process through which Orlando transitions into the English standards of femininity. The fact that Orlando must learn these traits implies that gender lacks an essential nature; instead, Woolf argues that gender is a social construct. The third and final section of this chapter then will discuss Orlando's life as a woman in England. An analysis of Orlando's sudden lack of emphasized physicality and her marriage to Shel will reveal the alternative models of femininity Woolf proposes. In addition to noting the similarities between Stein's and Woolf's critiques, this chapter will also discuss the differences in their alternative worlds. Instead of the utopian alternative Stein proposes, this paper will ask how Woolf's treatment of the body differs from Stein's. This chapter will also ask how the

¹ For examples, please see: Chia-Chen Kuo, Chris Coffman, and Robert Khon.

² Critics such as Brenda Hilt and Dorothy Robbins have engaged extensively in Woolf's incorporations of Freudian theory.

reader can use her proposed alternative to view the real-world implications of a strict gender binary.

This chapter's critique section will begin by examining Woolf's use of the gaze to define Orlando's relationship with the Queen. Throughout Orlando's life as a man, Woolf explicitly depicts the Queen's gaze and her objectification of Orlando's body. Despite the Queen's immediate interest in Orlando, he sits with his head bowed and avoids eye contact. The narrator recalls:

By the same showing, the Queen herself can have seen only a head . . . The long, curled hair, the dark head bent so reverently, so innocently before her, implied a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and a heart of gold; and loyalty and manly charm – all qualities which the old woman loved the more the more they failed her (18).

Woolf characterizes Orlando through the Queen's eyes, indicating her gaze as a powerful presence within the novel. Focusing on specific parts of Orlando's body, the Queen explicitly notes his hair, head, eyes, and, perhaps most interestingly, his legs. Although the narrator claims that the Queen gazes at Orlando's legs, Orlando's seated position does not allow the Queen to actually see them; instead, Woolf creates an absurdist situation in which the gaze is being directed toward an unseen object. The mocking tone Woolf employs to describe the gaze is furthered by her reversal of gendered subject positions. The gaze usually implies a male gazer and a female gazed upon object; however, the Queen, a woman, gazes upon Orlando, a man. The reversal of the gaze also indicates a reversal of expected authoritative subject positions. The Queen's objectification of Orlando inevitably places her in a dominant position

because the gaze implies authority over Orlando's body. The reader's ability only to see Orlando in relation to the Queen's gaze does not allow the reader to view him as an autonomous figure. Orlando's first characterization defines him through the lens of another character and begins to expose the gaze's ability to erase a subject's agency.

The Queen's gaze also begins to define Orlando's inner self as well as his physical appearance. The Queen's ability to gain insight into Orlando's inner character simply by looking at him begins to reveal Woolf's critiques of heteronormative gender roles. The narrator describes the scene:

And she held him a foot's pace from her and looked him up and down. Was she matching her speculations the other night with the truth now visible? Did she find her guesses justified? Eyes, mouth, nose, breast, hips, hands – she ran them over; her lip twitched visibly as she looked; but when she saw his legs she laughed out loud. He was the very image of a gentleman. But inwardly? She flashed her yellow hawk's eyes upon him as if she would piece his soul (19).

Immediately, the description of their interaction relies almost entirely on Orlando's physical body and the Queen's sense of sight. Woolf's assertion that Orlando's "truth" becomes visible through seeing his body in its entirety defines Orlando's identity as synonymous with his physicality. After seeing his body fully, the Queen pronounces him the "very image of a gentleman," continuing to connect Orlando's personal qualities with the visual image of his body. Noticeably, the Queen has not spoken with Orlando, further emphasizing the connection between Orlando's character and his body. Additionally, Woolf's assertion that the Queen's eyes can "piece [Orlando's] soul" defines even the most intimate parts of Orlando through his body and erases any spiritual or intellectual autonomy Orlando possesses. The emphasis on

Orlando's physical body throughout this section also places the reader in a position to objectify Orlando.

Through the description of the Queen's objectifying voyeurism, Woolf also begins to critique its treatment of the feminine subject. Using twentieth-century art criticism to read the Queen's gaze reveals Woolf's critique of heteronormative behavioral expectations. Stephen Kern, an art historian, notes this expectation in studies of the gaze within English and French paintings, specifically using Renoir's *In the Garden* to critique the woman that rejects the gaze. In his analysis, Kern writes:

In the Garden hinges at Renoir's ambivalent feeling about women . . . Her commanding presence and seeming intelligence belie Renoir's critical private remarks about formally educated and artistically accomplished women. The man gazes intently at Aline and holds her hand imploringly, while she nonchalantly leaves her hand in his and ignores his eyes riveted on hers. (47)

Kern notes that in this example, the male gaze and physical touching indicates an expression of love and ardor for Aline. However, Aline's averted gaze appears as a rebuke of male affection and becomes a sign of coldness towards her lover's attempts to gain her attention. Kern refers to Aline's coldness as an expression of Renoir's "ambivalent feeling[s]" towards educated women. Through his analysis of Victorian visual art, Kern also reveals the expectations that women should enjoy the male gaze or return it in order to avoid seeming harsh and uncaring. Similarly, using the Queen's gaze, Woolf disputes the idea that women are obligated to become sexual objects for the male gaze. Woolf's descriptions of the Queen's gaze imply voyeuristic

invasion of the other's body and emphasize the problematic aspect of the undesired and non-mutual fetishization of another's body.

In addition to noting the gaze's gendered expectations, Woolf also defines the Queen's gaze as sexual. The focus of the Queen's gaze on erogenous zones reveals that Orlando's body creates sexual desire. As the Queen runs her gaze over Orlando's "eyes, mouth, nose, breast, hips, [and] hands," Woolf strengthens the connection to the physical body. The parts of the body she specifically mentions, especially the mouth, breast, and hips, emphasize the sexual component of the Queen's desire. Notably, these specific body parts usually denote femininity and often sexualize the female body. The sudden role reversals, in which the mouth, breasts and hips become aspects of male sexualization, deny the reader's gendered expectations. Woolf also notes that the Queen gazes at multiple parts of Orlando's body, including parts that are not often considered sexual, such as the "nose." The exaggeration and inclusion of non-sexual body parts creates humor through the absurdity Woolf portrays. In this passage, the narrator also notes that the Queen's "lip twitched visibly." The reference to the Queen's mouth in this section implies sexuality, and the twitching lip also implies the Queen's pleasure in seeing Orlando's body. Although the Queen touches Orlando to hold "him a foot's pace from her" (19), her sexual desire for Orlando hinges on her ability to view rather than touch him. This pleasure forces the reader into a semi-voyeuristic state, watching the Queen objectify Orlando's body in a sexual manner. Inevitably, this objectification causes the reader discomfort in Woolf's reversal of expected gender subject positions.

The exaggerated prominence Woolf gives the gaze also identifies it as a sexual perversion. Using Freud's definition of a sexual perversion, Woolf portrays the Queen's prominent gaze as unnatural. Freud asserts that perversion can also be present if the subject "lingers over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim" (150). Yet, Woolf intentionally denies the Queen the "final sexual aim" of having sex with Orlando. The narrator claims that the Queen "knew a man when she saw one, though not, it is said, in the usual way . . ." (20). The verb "knew" connotes sexual relationships, but the lack of knowing in the "usual way" indicates a lack of any sexual actions. This passage also denotes humor in Woolf's deviation from expected heterosexual interactions. Instead, the Queen's emphasis on "seeing" Orlando reveals that her scopophilia becomes a perversion of "normal" sexuality, as she derives pleasure purely from looking. Freud also claims that perversions "extend in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union" (Freud, *Sexual Aberrations* 150). As evidenced in the passages above, the Queen fixates on Orlando's eyes, nose, legs, etc., which are not "designed for sexual union." Although the legs may correspond to the genital region, the especial emphasis on Orlando's calves actually moves away from the sexual parts of Orlando's body. Thus, the Queen's constant gazing at Orlando becomes a symptom of deeper sexual disturbance. In emphasizing the Queen's gaze to the point of sexual perversion, Woolf critiques the imbalanced power dynamics the gaze creates by portraying its absurdity and unnaturalness. In doing so, Woolf rejects the "natural" domination of the masculine over the feminine.

In addition to Woolf's extensive written critique of the gaze, she further breaks down its legitimacy through the use of photographs. Throughout the novel Woolf intersperses photographs of her real-life friends dressed up as the novel's various characters. Although Woolf forces the reader into a voyeuristic position by reading the Queen's textual descriptions of gazing at Orlando, the photographs further this position through forcing the reader to look at actual images rather than solely reading descriptions of gazes. Critics such as Helen Wussow suggest that Woolf intends to question the legitimacy of these images by creating an ambiguous subject within the photographs (3). Wussow specifically notes that the pictures of Orlando throughout the novel are actually Vita Sackville-West in various costumes. Wussow argues this dual identity of the photograph's subject "asks the reader to identify Sackville-West as Orlando and accept the photograph as evidence of Orlando's existence" (3). Thus, despite the reader's potential recognition of Sackville-West, "we must simultaneously perceive her as Orlando" (Wussow, 3). The identity of the photograph's subject becomes increasingly ambiguous as the reader confronts dualistic subjects. Wussow argues that this ambiguity aims to "mock the reader's scophophilia" (4) and questions the reader's need to recognize the photograph's subject (13). However, Wussow's argument also reveals Woolf's diminishing of the gaze's authority. Although the Queen repeatedly uses Orlando's appearance as an indication of his internal qualities, the photographs' ambiguous and dual identities define vision as an unreliable source. The reader's inability to trust visual images, and by extension their descriptions, delegitimizes the Queen's gaze and the assumptions she makes about Orlando's character. As sight and fetishization are also considered to be masculine characteristics,

Woolf's use of ambiguous photographic subjects also rejects masculine authority. Thus, in her critique and break down of the gaze, Woolf also begins to challenge gendered hierarchies.

The continued emphasis on Orlando's legs and calves take the established gendered role reversal to absurdity and becomes a running joke throughout the first half of the novel. Woolf juxtaposes Orlando's male body with an obsession with his legs, a commonly objectified part of women's bodies. The Queen's gaze especially focuses on Orlando's legs, calling them "the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon" (18). Later in the novel, after Orlando leaves Europe and becomes a Duke in Turkey, the narrator reveals speculation that Orlando's beautiful legs allowed him to receive his title. Woolf claims that "The envious said that this was Nell Gwyn's tribute to the memory of a leg. But, as she had seen him once only, and was then busily engaged in pelting her royal master with nutshells, it is likely that it was his merits that won him his Dukedom, and not his calves" (93). People's assumption that Orlando's legs received the Dukedom position negates Orlando's leadership and ambassadorial qualities, reducing him entirely to his appearance. In addition to creating humor through the exaggerated emphasis on his legs, Woolf may also be referencing the sudden obsession with seeing women's ankles and legs in the early twentieth-century as short hemlines became increasingly fashionable. A woman's legs became a fetishized object, and Woolf's prominent mention of Orlando's legs places Orlando into a feminine subject position. The use of gendered role reversal allows the reader to view this fetishization as absurd.

Woolf emphasizes the gendered role reversal further by exaggerating Orlando's masculinity. Orlando's nearly perfect fit into Elizabethan era ideals of masculinity differs from

the feminine subject position the Queen's gaze places him into. The Queen's description of Orlando as possessing a "heart of gold; and loyalty and manly charm" (18) aligns Orlando with masculine expectations of aristocratic and high class men. Woolf refers to Orlando as a "nobleman" and mentions his "manly charm" to reiterate his masculinity. Additionally, qualities such as a "heart of gold" and "loyalty" are highly coveted attributes in men of Orlando's social class. Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* describes these attributes as ideal in aristocratic men. Castiglione asserts that noblemen should be "bold, and loyal to whomever he serves," (57), and Woolf's mention of Orlando's "loyalty" denotes his noble masculinity. Castiglione also claims that qualities such as "prudence, goodness, fortitude temperance of soul" are also requisite features of a nobleman (88). Although Woolf does not use these terms specifically, references to Orlando's "heart of gold" is synonymous with "goodness" and "fortitude." These qualities' associations with ideal expressions of masculinity not only emphasize Orlando's masculine attributes, they indicate his specifically aristocratic form of masculinity. Woolf mockingly exaggerates Orlando's masculinity to fit him perfectly into the model for an aristocratic man. Yet, despite Woolf's recognition of Orlando's character markers of masculinity, she continues to place him into a feminine subject position. This contrast emphasizes Orlando's reversed gender positions in relation to the Queen. The Queen's ability to place Orlando within a feminine subject position - despite his exaggerated masculinity - erases Orlando's agency, as his subjectivity is defined through the Queen's actions rather than his own qualities.

By reversing the expected gender positions, Woolf is able to emphasize the problematic aspects of Orlando's physical and sexual objectification. Although he is defined as part of the

nobility, Orlando does not have a royal title and falls into a lower social position than the Queen. The Queen's status alone associates her and her view as authoritative, and the emphasis of her gaze on Orlando's body begins to imply female authority and sexual dominance. The Queen's social status and her role as the gazer indicate her authority in addition to Orlando's diminished autonomy. From their first meeting, the Queen places Orlando into a submissive position. The narrator describes that while the Queen gazes at Orlando, he sits with his head bowed and refuses to make eye contact. Orlando's body language defines his position as submissive to the Queen's. Orlando's reaction to the Queen's gaze mimics feminine ideals of subservience and passivity, furthering Woolf's critique of heteronormative gender roles. The Queen's objectification of Orlando forces the reader to also view him as an object and negates his autonomy. Through Orlando's placement into a feminine subject position, Woolf asserts that heteronormative behavioral expectations actively erase women's agency.

In addition to exposing the problematic aspects of heteronormativity, Woolf employs gendered role reversal to critique Freud's theories on fetishism. In giving the Queen the fetishist role, Woolf mocks Freud's sexist attitudes. Freud theorized that gazing at and fetishizing the female body acted as a coping method for men's castration anxiety, and Woolf challenges this idea of the gaze's function through casting the gazer as a woman. The Queen cannot be threatened by Orlando's castration because his male body actually possesses a phallus. It should also be noted that the Queen successfully fetishizes Orlando's body and reduces him to his physicality within these opening scenes without being similarly fetishized herself. By placing the Queen into the masculine subject position, Woolf subverts Freud's sexist theories and reclaims a sense of female agency. However, this sexual agency remains

within a subject position that is defined as masculine and oppressive to the feminine. The continuation of this power imbalance implies that simply reversing the sexes of the subjects does not remedy the problem. Instead, Woolf asserts that Freud's gendered definition of fetishization creates an imbalanced power dynamic between masculine and feminine subject positions.

Woolf's gender role reversal also reveals the problematic aspect of gender standards by denying Orlando the ability to gaze back at the Queen. The narrator's description of the Queen's physicality remains limited and does not invoke desire or admiration. While the descriptions of Orlando's body range from his head to his emphasized legs, the novel's description of the Queen focuses predominantly on her hands. The narrator comments:

Such was his shyness that he saw no more of her than her ringed hand in water; but it was enough. It was a memorable hand; a thin hand with long fingers always curling as if round orb or scepter; a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand; a commanding hand; a hand that had only raise itself for a head to fall; a hand, he guessed, attached to an old body that smelt like a cupboard in which furs are kept in camphor . . . And in truth, his mind was a welter of opposites . . . that he could see nothing; or only a hand. (17-18)

Although Orlando attempts to subject the Queen's hand to his own male gaze, he does not objectify or receive pleasure from the image of her body. His descriptions of her hands reveal only superficial information, exemplified by its description as "a thin hand with long fingers" that curled. Noticeably, Orlando's description does not connote desire or sexuality as the description of Orlando's body does. Instead, the narrator uses adjectives such as "nervous," "crabbed" and "sickly" to describe the only part of her body Orlando can gaze upon. The hand also denotes a sense of authority through its connection to the Queen and its ability to signal

execution. This specific hand literally has the ability to decide between life and death, ascending to a nearly God-like sense of authority. Moreover, the hand is not a body part usually used to sexually objectify a person and does not invite ideas of sexuality or sexual attraction. Thus, Orlando's male gaze takes no pleasure in what it sees. The last line, depicting that Orlando could "see nothing; or only a hand" acts as the final revocation of the male gaze. The lack of mutual gazing critiques the entire practice of fetishization as aggressive and invasive.

In addition to the gaze's ability to objectify Orlando, Woolf also denotes that it also allows the Queen to commodify Orlando's body. Woolf explicitly details the Queen's desire and lust for Orlando's physical appearance, and the Queen's desire causes her to give Orlando both money and land. In describing their relationship, Woolf describes that "Lands were given him, houses assigned him. He was to be the son of her old age; the limb of her infirmity," etc. (20). The description of Orlando as the "son of her old age" also equates his status with that of her child, implying a possible inclusion in her will and the potential for Orlando to receive an inheritance. Although the Queen originally hires Orlando as her scribe, Woolf clarifies that the Queen does so because she wants to gaze at him. As she gives Orlando money because she enjoys looking at him, the Queen effectively turns his body into a commodity. His physical beauty becomes a method of earning wealth, and the Queen's willingness to give him valuable gifts in order to make him stay with her casts Orlando's body as a commodified object. Woolf challenges the idea of the female body as a commodity by reversing the gendered roles and casting the Queen as the gazing and "buying" agent of Orlando's body. By commodifying Orlando's body, the Queen turns it into a literal object and disregards Orlando's emotional or intellectual satisfaction.

Woolf eventually recasts the male Orlando as the gazing subject of several court women. While Orlando's gender role now complies with heteronormative expectations of heterosexual men, Woolf's detailed critique of the gaze enables the reader to critique heteronormativity in Orlando's pursuit of women. Orlando betrays the Queen's affection for him by pursuing other women. Woolf describes the Queen's discovery of Orlando's betrayal:

Girls were roses, and their seasons were short as the flowers'. Plucked they must be before nightfall; for the day was brief and the day was all . . . It may have been Doris, Chloris, Delia, or Diana, for he made rhymes to them all in turn; equally, she may have been a court lady, or some serving maid. For Orlando's taste was broad; he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and weeds even had always a fascination for him. (21)

Although Orlando's identity initially revolved around becoming the object of the Queen's gaze, his newfound interest in pursuing women allows him to become the gazer. The metaphoric comparison of women to flowers or plants emphasizes that Orlando now has the gaze. The claim that "girls were roses, and their seasons were short as the flowers'" could refer to Orlando's fleeting interest, but also indicates his notice of their physical beauty and fragility. Moreover, Orlando does not mention any of their inner qualities, indicating that Orlando's interest in the various women relies only on their appearance. Woolf claims that "the day was short and the day was all" implying the women's inevitable loss of beauty and Orlando's eventual loss of interest in them. Rather than one person being objectified and focused upon, Orlando's gaze focuses on virtually any woman. The Queen's unexpected gaze within heteronormative gender roles forces the reader to notice it and places the reader into a position to critique Orlando's male gaze as well. Woolf not only shocks the reader into

recognizing the gaze by playing with the reader's expectations; she redefines the gaze as male to critique the subjugation of women.

Woolf also expands her critique of heteronormative power dynamics to include non-gendered aspects of identity. Woolf looks at power relations more pragmatically by also analyzing social status and wealth. Freud's writings on sexuality specifically focus on gender within heterosexual relationships while negating other factors that contribute to social power. Freud claims that men effectively dominate women as a method of subverting castration anxiety, which inevitably leads to the fetishization of women's bodies and the erasure of female agency. While the Queen's gaze on Orlando is a way to dominate him, the Queen's class and social positions already place her in a higher authoritative position. The Queen's social hierarchical position surpasses Orlando's nobility as she is in a position of significantly higher authority. The lack of a King figure further denotes the Queen's vastly higher and unchallenged power. Woolf's inclusion of multiple social categories indicates a chance for women to be in positions of power, but the Queen's absolute and unchallenged authority is not a realistic position for women. Instead, Woolf reveals gender's underlying influence in the creation of authoritative positions and women's consistent disadvantage.

Once Woolf has established her critique in this first section of the novel, she can use Orlando's transition into becoming a woman as a platform to challenge gender essentialism, as I will go on to discuss in this second section. Woolf uses Orlando's transition to reveal gender's socially constructed elements. Noticeably, distinct masculine and feminine subject positions require an assumed essential difference between masculine and feminine characteristics.

Woolf challenges this assumption by depicting gendered behaviors as learned traits after Orlando changes gender. Woolf thus argues that gender is a social construct and lacks essential characteristics.

Orlando's sudden change to being a woman, both physically and socially, reminds the reader of gender's unstable categorization. Scholars have attempted to argue that Orlando's sex remains constant throughout the novel, but Woolf notes that Orlando's socially gendered representation remains more important than her biological sex. Robert Khon argues that Woolf's novel leaves open the possibility that Orlando was always a woman. Khon argues that women's inability to own their own property causes Orlando to represent herself as a man in order to hold onto her personal wealth. However, Woolf, in seeming anticipation of such arguments, indicates that the social perceptions of Orlando's gender are more important than her anatomical sex. After Orlando's sudden sex change, the narrator claims:

Many people, taking this into account, and hold that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) Orlando has always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and remained so ever since.

But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. (103)

Woolf's response to Orlando's sex change reveals the ambiguity between anatomical sex and societal presentations of gender. Although Woolf acknowledges the inevitable speculations about Orlando's "true" gender identity, her narrator urges the reader to "let biologists and psychologists determine" the truth of Orlando's biological sex (103). Woolf's dismissal of

Orlando's biological sex denotes that a greater significance is given to culturally intelligible markers of gender. Woolf continues to refer to Orlando as a man "till the age of thirty," and a woman "ever since," despite predicted questions about her anatomical sex. In doing so, Woolf decouples the concepts of sex and gender while emphasizing that clearly defined gender plays a more prominent role in social interactions.

In Constantinople, Orlando awakens one morning to find that she has become a woman. She remains in Turkey living with gypsies and transitions into an androgynous subject position. At first, Orlando's gender change makes no discernible change to her character or behavior as she dons "those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex" (103). Her unisex clothing makes her gender more difficult to define. Orlando retains her ambiguous gender as she employs the gaze once more as a woman while living with a group of gypsies. As she lives among them tensions become prevalent between Orlando and the gypsies, stating "once a gipsy boy who had been asleep, woke in a terror feeling her eyes upon him" (108). The continuation of the objectifying gaze within the gypsy camp denotes Orlando's retention of masculine qualities despite her change of gender. Despite her new female body, Orlando's masculine behavior furthers her sense of androgyny. Moreover, her lack of sudden feminine behaviors rejects ideas of gender essentialism. Orlando's continued masculine traits reveal that these behaviors have been learned and are not intrinsically connected to her sex.

As Orlando eventually heads back to England, Woolf describes Orlando's *becoming* a woman and the behaviors and characteristics she must learn to be considered socially feminine. Orlando's learning to be a woman exposes gender as a performed social identity based on

socially constructed definitions of femininity. After she leaves the gipsy camp to return to England, Orlando becomes aware of her new gender and subsequent societal expectations.

Woolf writes:

At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck that she realized, with a start the penalties and privileges of her position. But that start was not of the kind that might have been expected.

It was not caused, that is to say, simply and solely by the thought of her chastity and how she could preserve it. In normal circumstance a lovely young woman alone would have thought of nothing else; the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone . . .” (113)

This passage indicates Orlando’s first adherence to western gendered expectations, especially through her clothing. Although she had previously worn only the androgynous Turkish trousers, her shift to wearing a skirt forces her to recognize the difference in social attitudes toward her gender. After she begins wearing feminine clothing on the boat, the captain offers to spread an awning for her to shade her from the sun, and Orlando realizes “with a start the penalties and privileges of her position” (113). This realization emphasizes the shift from societal masculine expectations to the feminine, and the “start” that Orlando experiences with this realization indicates a lack of intrinsic character change. Orlando learns to be a woman, which extends into her discussion of female chastity. Woolf writes that in “normal circumstances” Orlando’s prime concern would have been her womanly chastity; however, Orlando’s “start” does not stem from a preoccupation with chastity. Her lack of deep concern for “the whole edifice of female government” based on chastity implies that Orlando does not immediately possess

feminine characteristics. Noticeably, Woolf also indicates that “The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (102). These descriptions explicitly indicate a lack of gender essentialism. Instead, Woolf’s description of gender as a social construct further implies a necessity for expanded gender definitions. Orlando does not become feminine after becoming a woman; rather, her new obligations to wear feminine clothing and worry about her chastity become burdens and exemplify the confinement strict gender binaries reinforce.

This indication of limiting and restricting gender norms also pushes against common gender theories, especially Freud’s ideas of bisexuality and inversion. In “The Sexual Aberrations,” Freud asserts that physical bisexuality must stem from physical hermaphroditic qualities, “in which the sexual characters are obscured” (141). He also offers an alternative theory involving psychical hermaphroditic characteristics, indicating an inversion of male and female psychological states in relation to the anatomical body. However, Woolf’s use of social constructionist thinking contradicts Freud’s ideas. Woolf’s critique of essentialist gendered thinking breaks down Freud’s argument by allowing Freudian “inversion” to occur as a natural characteristic rather than an abnormality. Writing in regards to some of Woolf’s earlier works, literary critic Dorothy Robbins claims that Woolf’s criticisms of Freud act as “an alternative to strict Freudian interpretations of the female psyche,” (144). Robbins notes that “-Woolf offers a ruleless guide to the psychology of women” (144). Yet, *Orlando* consists of more than just an alternative to Freudian theories; it exemplifies the problematic implications of Freud’s essentialist thinking. Woolf, therefore, not only offers an alternative; she also emphasizes the reality of socially constructed gender norms and their problematic use in theorizing

psychological tendencies. Assuming these qualities contain a biological imperative ensures the continuation of overly restrictive gendered expectations.

Reading this transition section of the novel through the lens of Judith Butler's theories also exposes the performativity of Orlando's gender. In addition to Butler's argument that gender roles are socially regulated and enforced, she also argues in her theories of performativity that gender is created through actions that define gendered subject positions. As Orlando begins her voyage back to England, she begins to act in more feminine ways, which define her feminine subjectivity more than her anatomical sex. Woolf places the reader in a position to recognize Orlando's feminine subject position emerging through the performance of feminine actions. Reading this transition section as a performative transformation indicates that gender roles are created and regulated through active participation.

The third section of this chapter will focus on Orlando as a fully transitioned woman living in early twentieth-century England. Throughout this section, Woolf builds on the critique defined earlier in the novel to depict an alternative to heteronormative ideals. Orlando's body, which was previously cast as a fetishized object, becomes deemphasized to the point of erasure. After her change in gender, Orlando's deemphasized physicality denies the reader the ability to define her as a sexual subject. In Woolf's description of Orlando's experiences as a woman, she writes:

But love – as the male novelists define it – and who, after all, speak with greater authority? – has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry. Love is slipping off one's petticoat and – But we all know what love is. Did Orlando do that? Truth compels us to say no, she did not (198).

In contrast to Woolf's exaggerated emphasis on Orlando's male body, Orlando as a woman distances herself from physical aspects of her being. Woolf notes the perceived connection between love and sex, but proceeds to claim Orlando never had sex as a woman.³ The specific use of the word "she" to negate sexuality opens up the possibility for sexual experiences as a man, but the distance Woolf places between sexuality and womanhood differs from the male body's previous treatment. Whereas Orlando's male body was often depicted as an object of desire, Woolf completely negates the possibility of objectifying the female body by desexualizing it. Orlando's lack of sexuality cannot allow for her body to be seen as an object. Further, the constant references to visibility and the human gaze no longer appear in the section of the novel in which Orlando is a woman.

Woolf not only deemphasizes Orlando's physical body, she also foregrounds Orlando's intellect and artistic creativity. Woolf continues to give the reader alternate qualities of love implicitly associated with femininity because Orlando is now a woman. The qualities she emphasizes, "kindness, fidelity, generosity [and] poetry," focus on inner characteristics rather than specific physical parts or desires. The inclusion of poetry also indicates a connection to Orlando's intellectual and creative capacity and emphasizes the shift beyond the body. Woolf's emphasis on "kindness, fidelity, [and] generosity" further highlights Orlando's inner qualities and downplays the connection between love and sexuality. In her desexualization of the female body, Woolf also assigns the realm of intellectualism and inward feeling to women

³ Critics and biographers such as Hermione Lee have also noted Woolf's own sexual anxieties. Although this fact deserves attention in interpreting *Orlando*, I will argue that there is a deeper commentary on sexuality and sexual desire at play throughout the novel.

rather than men. The reversal of gendered expectations becomes jarring in the stark contrast to how women's and men's bodies and minds are often portrayed. This shock Woolf creates highlights the reader's gendered expectations, deliberately forcing the reader to confront their own gendered biases. In addition, Woolf also liberates the female body in this passage. The focus on Orlando's mentality and internal feelings, and very little discussion of her physical body, does not allow Orlando to be objectified. Instead, Orlando achieves a state in which she can be taken seriously as a woman within the literary and intellectual communities.

Woolf furthers her alternative to heteronormativity by breaking down gendered expectations within romantic relationships. As Orlando meets Shel, Woolf complicates both Shel's and Orlando's genders to reject standard gender roles. In the novel's beginning, Woolf makes Orlando's heterosexual identity clear. Orlando's pursuit of the unknown woman and the Russian Princess Sasha indicates that Orlando is heterosexual. However, these preferences become skewed as Orlando's gender changes, and his attraction to women turns into lesbian desire. Her eventual attraction to Shel creates further ambiguities as to her sexuality. Upon their first meeting, Orlando exclaims "You're a woman, Shel!" And Shel responds "You're a man, Orlando!" (184). This exchange between Shel and Orlando confuses gender roles, and subsequently defines their sexual identity as ambiguous. Because Orlando challenges the socially constructed concept of gender and gender norms, her sexuality cannot be placed into definitive hetero- or homosexual categories. Similar to Judith Halberstam's historical concept of the "female husband," Shel's ambiguous gender and gender roles destabilize a definitive gender and sexual orientation binary. As Woolf continues in the novel to describe their eventual married relationship, she portrays it as ideal for both Orlando's and Shel's needs. Shel

is able to explore the world, and Orlando is finally able to write again. Orlando's marriage exemplifies the possibilities for fulfilling relationships not based on traditional gender roles. Instead, precisely because Orlando's and Shel's marriage does not adhere to gender roles, they are able to create a meaningful relationship that satisfies the intellectual needs of both.

Although Woolf's emphasis on Orlando's intellect does not ignore societal expectations of women, Orlando's marriage to Shel and his constant absence continues to create an alternative world in which Orlando's identity is not dependent upon a man. Literary critic James Miracky discusses Orlando's eventual marriage to Shel, and the stress she experiences leading to the marriage. Miracky notes that "Orlando is not really given an opportunity to write as a woman until the nineteenth century, during which she encounters the messy obstacles of writer's block and logorrhea and can only complete her poem once she has bowed to Victorian tradition" (Miracky, 45). Miracky argues that Woolf deviates from Victorian traditions of marriage and that Orlando's relationship can also be read as a challenge and alternative to traditional forms of marriage. Orlando's doubt about the marriage's legitimacy leads to questions of the tradition's legitimacy. After becoming aware of her desire for marriage, Orlando questions ". . . if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts" (195). The questions Orlando contemplates reveal ambiguities about societal expectations of women, especially in relation to a heterosexual marriage. Although Orlando does technically participate in the marriage institution, Orlando's and Shel's vastly independent lives do not create a traditional relationship. Instead, Woolf's emphasis on Orlando's intellect

allows her to retain her previous identity without mental or sexual dependency on her male husband. Orlando's independence undoubtedly challenges marital norms, but it also indicates that Woolf's alternative to heteronormativity does not reject social conventions outright. Instead, Woolf's alternative disregards the expectations of the domestic and sexual housewife, and allows Orlando to remain highly independent and intellectual.

The birth of Orlando's son represents one of the few moments of focus on Orlando's body, but Woolf continues to subvert physical imagery by using overly metaphorical language to describe the scene. The narrator claims that Orlando has never had sex, at least as a woman, yet also includes the eventual baby that can only exist from Orlando having sex with a man.

Rather abruptly, Woolf describes:

Blue, like a match struck right in the ball of the innermost eye, he flies, burns, bursts the seal of sleep; the kingfisher, so that now floods back effluent like a tide, the red, thick stream of life again, bubbling, dripping; and we rise, and our eyes (for how handy a rhyme is to pass us safe over the awkward transition from death to life) fall on – (here the barrel-organ stops playing abruptly).

"It's a very fine boy, M'Lady," said Mrs. Banting, the midwife. In other word Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th and three o'clock in the morning. (216-217)

Despite Orlando's asserted sexual innocence, the first paragraph provides extremely graphic depictions of childbirth. Woolf depicts the still-blue baby as "burst[ing] the seal of sleep," one of the few references to Orlando's vagina and specifically female anatomy, eventually detailing the blood, or "red, thick stream of life" that also occurs in childbirth. The explicit descriptions of the birthing process eventually culminate in the stopping of the "barrel-organ" or Orlando's groans of childbirth as the baby is finally delivered. Yet, Woolf's description that "our eyes . . .

fall on – [the baby]” brings back the idea of the female gaze, both Orlando’s and the midwife’s, onto the male body. Woolf denies any inclination that the baby is being touched, but specifically notes the women’s gaze. Although Woolf emphasizes masculine physicality throughout the novel, this scene is one of the few instances she reminds the reader of Orlando’s female body. Within the birthing imagery, the language Woolf employs to depict the scene is significantly more metaphorical and convoluted than the rest of the novel. Although Woolf employs clear and explicit language throughout the rest of the novel, this birth scene that should emphasize the feminine body actually subverts the reader’s ability to focus on the imagery of Orlando’s body clearly.

This moment also represents a reaction against overly restrictive expectations of female sexuality and motherhood as part of heteronormative gender norms. The assertion that Orlando has never had sex, and the blatant product of sex, create a gap in logic and physical possibility. The undeniable contradiction pokes fun at this idea of the female body and female sexuality, denying Victorian ideas of how women’s bodies should be used. James Miracky also notes the sudden disappearance of Orlando’s son after his birth, as he is only vaguely referenced in Orlando buying booties in a department store. He claims that the “dropping” of the baby symbolizes Orlando’s relief from the “burden of motherhood” and allows her to “[experience] a fuller degree of freedom” (45). Although Miracky’s point must be taken into consideration, it can be expanded further to dropping the “burden” of early twentieth-century sexual ideals. Orlando’s lack of explicit sexual desires, and sudden emergence and disappearance of her baby, causes her to embody an exaggerated ideal of Victorian womanhood, in which sexuality becomes merely a method of reproduction rather than

pleasure. The fact that Orlando does not have sex, yet still becomes pregnant, takes Victorian ideals to the point of absurdity. The reader's recognition of Woolf's joke of the "virgin birth" highlights Orlando's bodiless-ness even further, but also begins to draw the reader's attention to the limitations of a bodiless alternative to heteronormativity. Although Woolf recognizes the need for the body in order to maintain the human race, the de-emphasis of Orlando's feminine body does not allow Orlando to experience sexual desire or pleasure.

Although Woolf's narrative form may be more conventional than Stein's, Woolf's underlying assertions are significantly more radical. While Stein's proposal of a lesbian utopia would certainly have been considered radical in the early twentieth-century, Woolf's alternative seeks to break down gendered categories completely. Woolf begins the novel by critiquing heteronormativity and the problematic aspects it entails; however, in contrast to Stein, Woolf's proposed alternative is not a utopia. Woolf's erasure of Orlando's female body allows her to excel intellectually, but it also erases Orlando's ability to express her sexuality and sexual agency. In contrast to Stein's unbridled joy and exploration of sexual desire, Woolf's alternative is not a celebration but an indication of the impossible situation women face within a heteronormative gender binary. Asserting the female body and sexuality leaves women in a position to become the fetishized object and seen as intellectually inferior; yet, erasing the body denies women the ability to feel sexual desire and pleasure. Thus, while Stein's lesbian utopia allows women to remain within a gender binary – and perhaps even encourages it – Woolf seeks to break down gendered categories completely. Woolf's alternative reveals that only through the disassembling of distinct masculine and feminine subject positions can women claim both intellectual and sexual freedom. Noticeably, Woolf's alternative encompasses a

much broader array of women's lived experiences. Stein is able to subvert certain gender categories through a lesbian relationship and stable economic standing; however, she does not offer an alternative for heterosexual women. In contrast, Woolf's conclusion that women must reject the gender binary extends to all women, as they are collectively caught in the double-bind Woolf exposes. Even in the twenty-first century, Woolf's call to disassemble gendered categories would be considered extremely radical and destabilize larger social hierarchies. Thus, Woolf's novel, published more than 80 years ago, is far ahead of its time.

The birth of Orlando's son represents the ideals of Victorian female (a)sexuality, exposing the imperfections of Woolf's alternative mode of femininity. Although erasing the feminine body will prevent the female body from being objectified, it also eliminates women's sexuality and their ability to feel desire and pleasure. The mockery of the pseudo-"virgin birth" that Woolf presents indicates this complete lack of sexuality as a result of erasing the prominence of the feminine body. Unlike Stein, Woolf does not present a utopian vision, and the problematic aspects of her alternative define heteronormative gender roles, rather than sexual orientation, as the underlying causes of women's oppression. Instead, the meaning which society has constructed and placed onto the body in the form of regulated gender norms allow for the objectification of the female body and diminution of the feminine intellect. By moving from the extreme of heteronormativity to the opposite extreme of physical erasure, Woolf reveals that women's place in society is consistently fraught with oppression within a strict gender binary. Woolf's conclusion that gender is the underlying problem for women builds on Stein's previous critiques of heteronormativity to produce a radical departure from

social norms and provide a space in which both men and women can express individuality and sexuality with a significant amount of freedom.

Conclusion: Beyond the Early Twentieth-Century

Despite the differences in style and tone, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* share a skepticism and criticism of early twentieth-century understandings of sexuality. Most sexology theories circulating during Stein's and Woolf's lives were based on models of heterosexuality. Within the limited recognition of homosexuality and same-sex desire, the common "inversion" theory continued to depict sexual relationships as inherently masculine/feminine even in the case of same sex relationships. However, neither Stein nor Woolf found themselves fitting into the established models of sexuality. Stein, whose lesbianism was one of the worst kept secrets of the Parisian art world, had a long term and loving relationship with Alice Toklas. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* details intimate moments of Stein's and Toklas' lives together, and Stein's depictions of their marital-like relationship offers an alternative to strict notions of heterosexuality. Woolf's personal relationships have evaded strict definitions, and her marriage to Leonard Woolf did not stop rumors of a sexual relationship with Vita Sackville-West. The later publication of Woolf's letters evidence this relationship more explicitly in Woolf's claims of desire for "the lusts of [Sackville-West's] flesh" (429). Although inundated with messages of heteronormativity, both writers experienced desire and sexuality in a non-heterosexual way.

Stein and Woolf's personal experiences and understanding of their own sexuality gives them a large stake in the claims made about desire, and for both writers, literature becomes a medium for their experiences to be legitimized. Both writers' experiences contradict

assumptions of heterosexuality. Responding to sexology theories, especially Sigmund Freud's, Stein and Woolf seek to expand the boundaries of desire beyond heteronormative constraints. Both authors look especially critically at the consequences of scopophilia and its masculine assumptions. Stein's critique of Freudian scopophilia allows women readers and Stein herself to act as the fetishist and expands the definition of fetishized desire to include multiple objects. Woolf creates her critique through gender role reversal, casting the Queen as the desiring subject and the male Orlando as the desired object. The denial of readerly expectations emphasizes the unequal, gendered relationships Freud's ideas of scopophilia create. These specific critiques may vary slightly, but both work to highlight problematic aspects of assumed gender roles within sexual relationships.

Stein's and Woolf's use of non-conventional literary forms allow them to make radical assertions about gender and sexuality during the early twentieth-century. Although Stein uses a fairly clear three part structure to organize the progressing intimacy of the text, her form deviates radically from the stanza structure poetry often uses. Instead, Stein uses paragraphs to organize the parts of each poetic subsection. The use of paragraphs allows Stein's repetition and fragmentation to run on continuously and creates the sonic world that becomes imperative to understanding Stein's reaction to heteronormative roles. Within this sonic world, Stein finds pleasure and desire not in meaning, but rather in language itself. Woolf's form is considerably less experimental than Stein's, but still offers innovation in response to tradition. Woolf insists that *Orlando* is a biography, yet the novel's protagonist is a fictional character – interspersed between real historical figures – and his/her lifespan stretches across centuries with little to no sign of aging. The blending of fiction and nonfiction elements within her "biography" deviates

from expected literary genre categories. Stein's and Woolf's use of innovative forms depart from the patriarchal stronghold of literature and creates a space for women's literary works. Using formal innovation, Stein and Woolf are able to assert their extremely unconventional rejection of heteronormativity.

In addition to the use of unconventional literary structures, Stein and Woolf also employ humor as an important strategy in their critiques. Stein's use of language becomes tongue-twister like in its extreme repetition and the nonsensical nature of many of her descriptions is actually very funny. For example, in the poetic subset "Chicken," Stein writes: "Alas a dirty word, alas a dirty third alas a dirty third, alas a / dirty bird" (492). Stein rhymes the words "word," "third" and "bird" to playfully engage the reader in language's sounds, and the term "dirty" implies sexual desire. Stein also incorporates anecdotal elements of desire into her poetry through the term "Alas," which echoes Alice Toklas' name. Additionally, Stein's reference to Alice as a "dirty bird" is humorous in its euphemistic and coquettish phrasing. Woolf also plays with language and absurdity through creating exaggerated and overdone descriptions. In one of Orlando's meetings with the Queen, Woolf describes his reaction: "the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; he heard the waters flowing and the birds singing; spring broke over the hard wintry landscape; his manhood woke; he grasped a sword in his hand. . . he saw the flower of danger growing in a crevice . . ." (30). Woolf's descriptions of hyperbolic reactions create absurdity rather than sincerity, as do the exaggerated sexual innuendos underlying each reaction. Although each individual clause tells the reader about Orlando's reactions, Woolf combines them to diminish their intensity. Instead of viewing Orlando's feelings with empathy or possible understanding, the reader can only

laugh at the exaggeration. Even Woolf's gendered role reversal and the extremity of the Queen's gaze acts as an inside joke between Woolf and the reader, who will undoubtedly recognize the reversal. Throughout both Stein's and Woolf's works, humor and linguistic playfulness add a sense of lightness to the texts. Moreover, humor ultimately serves a much larger function as a method of critique. Stein and Woolf use humor in their depictions of Freudian theories – such as fetishization – to mock his ideas and question their legitimacy. By exaggerating Freudian concepts through reversed expectations and linguistic play, Stein and Woolf not only create enjoyment for the reader; they also emphasize an underlying absurdity within early twentieth-century understandings of sexuality. Using humor to make larger social commentary helps to reduce the threat of these arguments, as each writer seeks to destabilize established social categories.

Although Stein's form and writing style may be more abstract and experimental than Woolf's, Woolf builds on Stein's depictions of lesbianism to assert still more radical challenges to gender and gendered expectations. Stein rejects notions of heteronormativity, but does not necessarily challenge established ideas of gender. In fact, her own relationship with Alice Toklas resembles a gender normative marriage, in which Alice, the feminine figure, tends to the domestic tasks while Stein does the more public work of making art. Stein portrays Alice's domestic role within their relationship in the poem "Cooking." Stein uses the word "Alas" to imply Alice's name and places her name next to food items, such as "wedding butter meat" (492). The close proximity between Alice and food's and cooking's domestic implications, indicates some adherence to traditional relationship roles. However, Woolf's rejection of heteronormativity further extends to reject ideas of gender. Woolf challenges gender norms

through Orlando's sudden change in sex and gender halfway through the novel. Moreover, the most radical assertion Woolf makes is not the change itself, but rather Orlando's ability to shift fluidly between a masculine and feminine gender identity. Orlando conforms to Elizabethan expectations of masculinity perfectly, but his/her ability to learn how to become a woman as she travels back from Turkey to England argues that gender is socially constructed rather than an intrinsic and essential part of a person's identity. Orlando's feminine subjectivity can be read as a performative consequence of her adherence to expected social gender norms. *Tender Buttons*, published in 1914, acts as a foundation for the kinds of bolder assertions that Woolf makes in 1928 with *Orlando's* publication. Stein combines gendered desires to create an ambiguous gender identity in order to assert and legitimize her own lesbian sexuality. Fundamentally, however, Stein does not challenge the underlying structures of gender. While Stein's ideas remain radical for the early twentieth-century, Woolf's work goes two or three argumentative steps further to assert the inessential qualities of gender.

Stein and Woolf offer strong arguments against the prevailing attitudes towards sexuality in the early twentieth-century; moreover, their social commentary also proposes a solution to the problems of heteronormativity and overly narrow gender roles. Stein presents an alternative utopia, which emphasizes lesbian desire and sexuality. Her poetry bursts with joy and playfulness while simultaneously depicting sex with another woman. Lines such as "Go red go red, laugh white" (475) from the subset "Suppose an Eyes," demonstrates the legitimization and pleasure Stein finds in having sex with women. The word "red" implies sexuality, and the color white is often symbolic of purity or virtue. In combining insinuations of sexuality and purity, Stein legitimizes her sexual desires. Additionally, the inclusion of the word

“laugh” denotes happiness and pleasure within her lesbian sexuality. These positive descriptions of Stein’s sexuality reveal a utopian alternative to heteronormativity in the form of lesbian desire. If heterosexuality creates gender imbalance and serves as a basis for feminine subjugation, then, Stein suggests, lesbian sexuality allows one to feel sexual desire and pleasure without participating in systems of oppression. Stein’s alternative to strict heteronormativity encourages women to participate in a lesbian utopia.

Woolf’s writing also offers an alternative to a heteronormative world; yet, her vision remains more pragmatic than Stein’s idealized utopia. Stein’s alternative takes place almost solely in the domestic sphere and ignores work or public interactions. Further, Stein’s utopia only exists for lesbian women. Woolf’s alternative is not as exclusive, as the reader sees Orlando’s work relations and his/her interactions within public settings as well. Woolf’s alternative is also more pragmatic than Stein’s because it includes the identities of hetero- and bisexual women. Woolf uses Orlando’s life as a man as a critique of gender norms, but her treatment of the feminine Orlando drastically differs. As Woolf depicts the male Orlando, she emphasizes his body and physicality above all else. Orlando is constantly seen and the multiple references to his beautiful calves become a running joke throughout the first half of the novel. The gender role reversal through casting Orlando as the feminine, gazed-upon object undoubtedly adds to the novel’s humorous elements. However, as Orlando becomes a woman, Woolf deemphasizes Orlando’s feminine body to the point of obscurity. Even in her depictions of Orlando giving birth, the language becomes so metaphorical and symbolic that the reader cannot gain a clear sense of Orlando’s female body. Instead, Woolf begins to emphasize Orlando’s intellect to the point of erasing her physicality. After re-meeting the poet Nick Green

a few hundred years after her poetry was rejected by him as a man, he finds the manuscript for her poem “The Oak Tree” and insists on its publication. Orlando becomes a poetic success, and her writing becomes the focus of Woolf’s narrative during the second half of the novel. Woolf’s alternative centers on the de-emphasis on Orlando’s body and the foregrounding of Orlando’s intellect, which rejects ideas of heteronormative gender imbalance. Yet, unlike Stein’s work, Woolf’s alternative directly engages with real-world public situations and heterosexual women’s desires. By erasing Orlando’s physical presence, Woolf suppresses her sexual body as well and limits feminine sexual desire and pleasure. However, Woolf’s stark and exaggerated juxtaposition between the treatment of Orlando’s male and female bodies implies that Woolf wants the reader to view these two alternatives as problematic. To suggest that Woolf advocates for suppressing women’s sexuality is an overly simplistic reading of the text; instead, Woolf argues that as long as gendered cultural intelligibility exists, any alternative to women’s contemporary situation will remain problematic and imperfect.

Stein’s and Woolf’s challenges to gendered culture were also exemplified in their personal lives and their rejection of traditional motherhood. In her life with Alice Toklas, Stein chose to never have children. Woolf also remained childless out of fear of passing on her mental illness to the child. However, their literary works become their creative and intellectual legacies. As Ulla Dydo has noted, Stein often referred to her works as her “babies” in notes to Alice Toklas. Despite not having children with Toklas, Stein instead views her literary creativity and its product as a type of offspring. Woolf’s opting out of motherhood inevitably challenges certain expectations of women and heteronormative gender roles. The characters within her novels and the ideas they represent become the substitute for children, as author-hood

becomes a substitute for motherhood. Stein's and Woolf's attitudes towards their literary works as a type of reproduction challenge the societal definitions of motherhood, and expand its definition beyond heteronormative assumptions.

The reversion back to traditional gender norms during the Doldrum period seems to have set back some of the advancements Stein and Woolf were trying to propose. Women were once again expected to adhere to ideals of motherhood and domestic bliss, which eventually led to Betty Friedan publishing her work on the "problem without a name." The rising rates of depression and dissatisfaction amongst housewives, however, eventually brought about later feminist waves and reevaluation of gender norms. Discussions of gender also incorporated issues of sexuality and recognition of same-sex desire. Although acceptance of homosexuality is arguably much higher in 2013 than it was in 1914 or 1928, controversy still surrounds the topic. The current debate over marriage equality and the constitutional rights afforded to same-sex couples exemplify the ongoing struggle for those who fall outside of heteronormative expectations. However, the changing public opinion and views of non-heterosexual relationships are finally tending towards a more open-minded and expansive view of sexual desire. In a *Washington Post* article, Republican Arizona Senator Jeff Flake even announced that while he did not support the legalization of gay marriage, he thought the possibility of a Republican presidential candidate supporting same-sex marriage was "inevitable." The shift in attitudes of even the political right exemplifies the shift Stein and Woolf advocated for nearly 100 years ago. As society begins to shift from a state of staunch heteronormativity into one that allows more sexual freedom, our understanding of sexuality and gender can do nothing else but expand. The challenge to homosexual suppression that is

ongoing – and finally gaining widespread acceptance – challenges the authority of heteronormativity, and the breakdown of heteronormative expectations will inevitably lead to a challenge of gender norms. The realization of Stein’s lesbian utopia actually has the chance to be publically realized and accepted, leading to the realization of Woolf’s de-gendered ideal.

The use of humor to discuss sexuality and desire also remains prominent in many attempts to legitimize non-heterosexual desire. In addition to the process of legalizing same-sex marriages, LGBTQ identities are also being increasingly represented and recognized within popular culture. Dan Savage’s “It Gets Better” campaign seeks to eliminate some of the harmful pressures those outside of the heteronormative sphere face, and it has received support from many powerful politicians and celebrities. Savage is also well known for his sex advice column “Savage Love.” Within the column, Savage legitimizes various forms of sexual desire, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and kink. In his responses, Savage often employs humor and linguistic puns in talking about desire in its variety of forms. Although some of the sexual desires depicted within the letters he receives transgress gender or heteronormative boundaries, his use of humor reduces their threat to tradition and legitimizes them within a public space. Undoubtedly, Savage’s humor and straightforward approach to various kinds of sexual desire have helped to expand socially acceptable sexualities and gender presentations. Even DC Comics’ *Batman* comic series has introduced a bisexual transgender character as evidence of this increased acceptability. The reaction against heteronormativity has become significantly stronger, and activists like Savage and the progress DC Comics has made exemplify the progress society is making towards legitimizing sexual desire and gender expression that does not fit into heteronormative categories. The success humor

has had in allowing people to discuss sexuality and desire in a more open-minded way shows that while Stein's and Woolf's assertions about sexual and gender identities were radical for their time, their methods have become a necessity for contemporary and future discourse.

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